最強をこごらせた
レベルカンスト剣聖女
ベアトリーチェの弱点
その名は「ぶーぶー」
3
KAZUMA KAMACHI
illust.
鎌池和馬
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The Weakness of Beatrice the Level Cap Holy Swordswoman That Made Being the Strongest Even More Trouble – His Name? Boo Boo - Volume 03

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最初は憧れだった。
足を引っ張らないように
命懸けの【迷宮】へ
誘う事はなかったけど、
宿屋街で見かけるたびに話をした。

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その名は「ぶーぶー」

最強をこごしらせた レベルカンスト剣聖女 ベアトリーチェの弱点 3

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Armelina's☆Matching SNS Lobby

The Detached Magic Palace of Roppongi, Tokyo, was a white building in a green paradise carved out of the city center's best district. It was made so the resident, servants, and guests would each walk down their oddly separate hallways without ever crossing paths. That complex structure may have been similar to a TV station.

And one of the Detached Magic Palace's living spaces for servants was a bath.

The 3 maids – sized large, medium, and small – were soothing the day's exhaustion there.

"Now, a surprise visit from your master!"

"Gyaaahh!? M-m-milady!?"

When a girl with long black twintails suddenly showed up and jumped into the large bath, the shortest maid, Haruka, screamed.

"Nooo, now I have to take care of your hair again, milady. Umm, moisture cream, extra virgin olive oil, and camellia extract…"

"Oh? Sounds like her hair is going to be delicious."

"It sounds more like you're repairing a cathedral fresco!!"

The girl whose long hair spread out on the bathwater's surface did not seem to mind.

The normal height and sporty second sister, Misoka, looked exasperated as she rested her head on the tub with her semi-long hair tied back with a hair tie.

"So the lady's back to her bad habits, is she? But isn't this a little soon? It's normally only once a month that she's so starved for attention she acts like she'll die without it."

"Given her background, I do not mind letting her indulge in this. But, miss, I've

been meaning to tell you that you need to wash your body before getting in the bath. This is poor manners."

The largest (breast-wise) maid who kept her tutor glasses on even in the bath, Iroka, gently scolded the girl, but it would not have much effect. While Iroka had her long hair carefully wrapped in a towel, their master was a troublesome girl who would relieve her stress by jumping into the gazebo jacuzzi without even removing her red dress.

As she floated face up in the bathwater like usual and Haruka quickly placed a towel over the important bits, the twintail girl used some kind of device.

"Bff!? Your smartphone!? Please don't bring a camera-equipped communication device into a bath full of soft maiden skin!!"

"I'm talking with Armelina, so it's fine. She's apparently a strict civil servant who was too much of a stickler for the rules to stay at Sakuradamon."

She was not entirely focused on this conversation because she was also facing a problem on the screen.

The career woman on the screen had this to say:

"Anyway, I've started using that Nanskagram thing. I heard raising your online status can make it easier to put together a Party for exploring the Labyrinth."

"I see, I see. Well, you don't want to sit around in an inn town tavern all the time. We can only stay in Ground's Nir for a few days at a time, so I understand wanting to get as much done in this world as you can so you can focus on the Labyrinth once you're there."

People's appearances and occupations were entirely different between the real world and Ground's Nir, but that did not mean relationships had to restart from zero.

If you got along with some people at your school or workplace, you could Sign In together. And on the internet, you could act differently than in real life to gather people. You could also build a connection by exchanging contact information after meeting in Ground's Nir. Both lies and the truth could be used freely. An unpopular student at a prep school could act like a heroic character online and become a leader who ended up visiting the Labyrinth with an idol or a

foreign princess who had changed their appearance to preserve their anonymity.

Whether in reality or online, those connections were vital.

…Of course, those also led to the creation of troublesome Guilds like the military Elkiad or the extremist Religious Society, so it was not always a good thing.

“Now, I’d like some advice about that. You’re the human bagworm who uses the internet to put together a Party without taking a step out of your home, so I’d like to call you master. You understand, don’t you?”

“What!? Who’re you calling a human bagworm!?”

The career woman on the screen ignored the caged bird who lived off of taxes and got to the point.

“No matter what I do, I can’t get more than 3 ‘sures’. Can you tell me what I’m doing wrong? I’m about to die of loneliness.”

“Let’s see. Where’s your page?”

“Here!! So it’s not just the rest of the world!? Not even my friends are checking it!?”

The twintail girl left the white building and entered a night so tranquil it was hard to believe this was in the city center.

The Detached Magic Palace’s grounds were a kilometer-wide circle. If you thought of pi as about 3 (ha ha), then the circumference was approximately 3 kilometers. A lap would make for a decent jog.

…She had been nearly helpless during the recent Demon Tselika incident. She did not feel like she had fully protected Boo Boo’s heart, so she was in the process of remaking her body as a form of penance.

As the girl ran alongside the tall wall “again”, she sent an annoyed voice into her smartphone.

“…Um, Armelina.”

“Yeah, what did you think? I tried to include as many of the things I like as I

could. I didn't hold anything back! And I put up more than 200 photos pretty quickly. I worked hard! So how in the world do I have less than 3 'sures' when the internet is connected to the entire human race!?"

"Mind explaining why every last one of those photos has your face blotted out!?"

"Eh? With my job, I can't exactly reveal my face, now can I?"

"And look at this profile. Name: Unknown. Sex: Unknown. Age: Unknown. Academic History: Unknown. Occupation: Unknown. Favorite Food: No-Bake Cheesecake. …What is with all these redactions!? Am I reading a classified document I shouldn't be touching!?"

"I can't help it. I work for a private detective agency that gathered retired police officers and JSDF officers to handle the special investigations the police can't touch! A-and it wasn't all redacted! I made sure to mention the no-bake cheesecake!"

"And what are we supposed to make of this photo of the mysterious sweet tooth rejoicing as she fires a Gatling gun in an underground shooting range?"

"Oh, now that was fun! Thanks to my JSDF connections, I was invited below Fuji! I bet I'm 1 of only like 3 Japanese people who have held that in their hands as it rotated 12 thousand times a minute. When I told the Yokosuka marines about it at the bar, you should've seen how wide their eyes got."

"I'm saying no one can understand what it means if you don't explain the story behind it! Just from your page, you look like a dangerous person of unknown identity having fun firing heavy weaponry in a secret base built below your home!"

"Ehh?"

The career woman's voice was entirely void of tension.

The twintail girl sighed in the cutting-edge "sportswear" that Iroka had recommended to her (while unable to stop grinning).

"Armelina, we're not uploading meme videos to a video sharing site, so you don't need anything fancy."

“But then how am I supposed to gather attention? I’m sick of these days where my number of ‘sures’ would round down to 0. It’s just depressing seeing people upload a commentless photo of a dandelion and then get around 100 ‘sures’.”

“Don’t cry, police woman. Just be yourself. Then you’re sure to get plenty of Party members on Nanskagram. Here, I’ll upload a photo of me to show you. There are plenty of ways to make friends while hiding your identity.”

Beatrice
@bu-bu-love
5m
どなたかちょっと【迷宮】までご一緒しませんか？　フレンド募集中☆
600,051 イイヨ!
770 コメント

“Wha-!?”

In a far distance place, a chair clattered against the floor. A career woman in glasses and a tight skirt suit was looking down at her smartphone.

(Wh-what the hell is this!? Is she that clueless? Did she start wearing that because someone told her it was cutting-edge sportswear? She’s no emperor, so is this the Princess’s New Clothes!?)

This is what she found on her friend’s page:

(Photo)

A sweaty girl with black twintails stands on a jogging course at night. She is breathing heavily, her cheeks are red, she is wearing a PE uniform with red bloomers, her hand covers her eyes, and she has a thin smile on her lips.

(Comment)

“Could anyone accompany me to the Labyrinth for a bit? Looking for friends☆”

Five minutes after uploading, it had more than 600 thousand “sures”. The comments included some that were clearly not in Japanese, so this was a worldwide celebration.

The career woman’s efforts and her 200+ mountain of photos had been easily surpassed and blown away in only 5 minutes. Her dead eyes read through comments like “She’s got some pretty nice tits”, “If you’re going to upload photos like you’re a model, you need to be at least this good”, or “Whether professional or amateur, anything below this would be worthless”. Her hands naturally rubbed lightly at her chest instead of the smartphone.

Flaaaaat.

“…”

On that day, a career woman with a lopsided frown drank tequila (which she

normally avoided) until the first train of the day left, greatly worrying the elderly bartender.

“I thought you said we *weren’t* supposed to upload meme images, you moron!!”

“Ma’am, I think you’ve had enough.”

“Shuddup! I’m not reahy for cold waher yed. Bring out allllll the tehila you got! I’m nod leavin’ till I’ve had 600 thouhand boddles!”

Chapter 1: Tower Defense!

Part 1

As a human-bodied, pig-faced Iberian Orc, Boo Boo was around 4 meters tall with plenty of fat covering powerful muscles. While he was collecting yellow fruits from the branches overhead, he spotted a familiar face swinging a fishing pole at a nearby stream. Several rectangular frames made from thin chains were displayed in midair, so she may have been using some kind of tricky Magic to read the fishes' movements.

She was staring at the water with an extremely serious look on her face and muttering something under her breath.

"No matter what you do, a small face wins out. So is perspective the key to it all? If I make double peace signs in front of the camera like this and then pull my head back…like this? Eureka! This is the equation for victory! It's gotta be this angle. Heh heh heh…"

"Boo. What are you doing, Armelina? Why are you sitting on that big box?"

"Nwahduckfacedrabech!?"

As Boo Boo had pointed out, the green Fighter Priest was using a large locked treasure chest as a chair. She sprang upwards, still in her sitting position, and her face was beet red.

"Y-you saw that!? No, um, I had way too much to drink yesterday and it's still affecting me. Man, that turmeric really doesn't work. I might be in trouble soon. Ow, ow, ow! The hangover is still lingering in the core of my head…"

"What does all that mean?"

Treasure chests did not grow in the mountains or forest, so she would have had to lug it all the way out here. That would have been simple enough for Armelina whose physical specialization allowed her to swing around metal balls and giant hammers.

“Well, I have my reasons… What about you, Boo Boo? Are you out searching for food again?”

“I thought I would get some Wild Cow milk today.”

He claimed to be after cow milk, but Boo Boo was gathering yellow fruits the size of human heads. Armelina tilted her head and grimaced at the lingering hangover, but the answer presented itself soon thereafter.

The sounds of snapping branches told her something quite large was approaching. Sensing danger, the Fighter Priest threw out her fishing pole and got up from the treasure chest.

“Armelina, Wild Cows are pretty unruly, so you need to be careful. The females have curly horns, but let your guard down and they’ll send you flying with a single jab.”

“Eh? Even someone as large as you?”

“But don’t worry. They’re obedient if you give them some Tipsy Fruit.”

The Iberian Orc was exactly right.

A giant mammal the size of a light car arrived as it knocked over trees, but Boo Boo tossed the yellow fruit to the ground. When it caught scent of them and began chewing on them, it grew unsteady and then collapsed on its side.

Boo Boo picked up what he had set down next to him: a wooden bucket like one might drop into a well.

“It won’t struggle now. The trick is to milk them while they’re like this.”

“Uh, um, ummmm…”

As Armelina watched, he used his giant hands to casually grab the giant udders. He squeezed out the milk with surprisingly practiced hand. He seemed to have used a fruit that grew alcoholic through natural fermentation, but that was not the point to the brightly blushing Fighter Priest.

“Y-you can’t do that, Boo Boo! Y-you can’t treat a girl like this. Do it at a tavern and you’ll be crossing a pretty serious line!”

“Boo? What’s a tavern? Some tricky star???”

“Th-that’s kind of scary. Who knows what could have happened to me if I’d kept drinking until I passed out yesterday. I need to show more self-restraint… Mutter, mutter…”

Boo Boo only looked puzzled as he completed his work, tore off a green leaf, and held it near the Wild Cow’s nose. The giant mammal blinked, got back up, and staggered off into the forest.

“Boo Boo, what was that?”

“Oh, that was Wide Awake Mint to sober it up. If I left it there, a Werewolf or something would’ve eaten it, so I make a point of helping it recover.”

Armelina groaned and came to a stop.

After a while, she averted her gaze and spoke quietly, as if making a confession.

“Sorry, Boo Boo. Do you have any more of that leaf?”

She tapped her index fingers together and mumbled the question, but the conversation was cut short by a high-pitched cry that was more of a “meh” than a “moo”. They looked down and saw 3 calves too young for their fur pattern to have grown in. They were rubbing against Boo Boo’s feet.

“I think these are Wild Cow babies. They were left behind.”

“Weren’t they probably drawn to you by the scent of the milk you took, Boo Boo?”

Unsure what to do, Boo Boo’s hands wandered through the air, but the hungry calves would not leave his side. Even after the sobering mint, the mother cow had not recovered enough to notice their absence and return, so they would become seriously separated before long.

“Boo, I guess I have to take them back to their herd.”

“Eh? You know where their home is? Didn’t you say they’re wild?”

“Don’t underestimate my nose. I can sniff out Jewel Truffles and Tree Hollow Honey, so finding their mom will be easy.”

But then wild killer intent prickled at the back of his neck.

The entire forest shook. The frightened calves kept near Boo Boo and Armelina as the surrounding trees were toppled by a small hill of a creature. The monster looked like a complex hybrid of a lion, a snake, and a goat. Armelina looked up at it and grabbed her metal staff of a Shining Weapon.

“A Chimaera? And this one’s huge!!”

They were omnivores, but when they were upset, they were known to torment their prey to cheer themselves up. They had no fangs, so their prey was not granted a quick death and they especially liked to target large herbivores. Was it after the drunk mother? If so, it might try to use the screams of her children.

Boo Boo responded by placing the milk bucket down on the black dirt and glanced down at the calves that continued to weakly tremble and call for their mother with “moos” and “mehs”.

“Armelina. Keep an eye on this. Don’t let the calves drink it.”

“Hold on. What are you doing, Boo Boo?”

“Boo. You can’t help taking lives to eat, but that’s not what he’s doing.”

He grabbed the giant Shining Weapon at his waist that could be mistaken for a log or a steel beam, lightly spun it around, and held it out toward the Chimaera’s nose. Having borrowed some milk, that man among men made an announcement while protecting the calves.

“You chose the wrong time to hunt. That’s my prey. I won’t let you have it.”

Part 2

Wide Awake Mint seemed to have some effect on hangovers. Armelina was

feeling a lot better and Boo Boo asked her a question while holding his large bucket in one hand.

“What are you doing here, Armelina?”

“Well, the treasury I use in the inn town is having some trouble. They’re swapping out all of the locks, so they can’t look after my valuables until that’s done. That’s why I just visited the depths of the Labyrinth and grabbed a tricky-to-open treasure chest.”

Humans could use the Gates to freely travel between Earth and Ground’s Nir, but anything other than humans was much harder to transport. And since they had to return to Earth periodically to avoid the mental and physical problems brought on by a long stay, they would have to let go of the treasure they were leaving in Ground’s Nir.

“But just the chest’s lock isn’t enough to put my mind at ease. Can I bury it near your house, Boo Boo? I doubt anyone’s going to go to the trouble of digging holes there. Not human or wild beast.”

“I don’t mind at all. Everyone has their secret treasures.”

That last comment made her very curious, but she was distracted when Boo Boo picked up the treasure chest with his empty hand.

“I’ll carry that.”

“Oh, you’re such a gentleman, Boo Boo. Not many guys are willing to sound so pretentious around me.”

“Boo? What’s a gentleman???”

They continued chatting on the way to Boo Boo’s leaf house partway up the mountain.

“I asked Beatrice and Filinion to get some Sour Grapes, so they should be back soon. If you put some sour fruit juice in the milk bucket, it solidifies and keeps longer, which is convenient. It’s really yummy if you put it in a leather bag water bottle and cool it in the river.”

“Oh, so is it like cream cheese? I really like no-bake cheesecake.”

“It makes a lot and it lasts a long time, so we can all eat some.”

The conversation had taken an unexpectedly gourmet turn, but Armelina's main task was burying the treasure chest full of her personal items. She said bye to Boo Boo as he entered his leaf house and she started searching for a good spot outside.

(In the field, I guess? The dirt looks soft, so it would probably be easy to bury something there.)

"Zona zona."

"Uuh, there's a Break News stabbed into the field!?"

It was Ileana, the greatest of the Mandragoras. That brown woman was known as a perverted carrot by the Fairy Queen and she was buried up to the bottom of her chest as if relaxing in a sand bath.

Armelina was not going to bury the treasure chest where anyone could see her, so she had no choice but to head past the leaf house and to the opposite side of the field.

This area got little sun and had large stones lying around. It may have been where Boo Boo had gathered all the roots and stones that were in the way when preparing his field.

(But if it isn't popular, it's perfect for hiding something.)

Armelina placed the treasure chest on the ground and checked the lock just to be sure. She was mostly known for constantly swinging around heavy maces and balls on chains, but her specialty in physical movement also scaled down to the micro-level and allowed her to do detailed work like picking locks.

"Now, then."

She pulled a few icepick-like tools from her bright green priest outfit with a large slit up the sides. She followed the guidance of some Magic light to slip them into the gap between the lid and box instead of into the keyhole. After feeling a solid sensation like she was catching at it with metal fingernails, she stuck an L-shaped tool into the keyhole and twisted it like a lever.

It easily opened like she had used a real key.

"Curse these master keys for working so well. This is why I can't completely

trust the locks.”

The Fighter Priest lamented her own skill.

Incidentally, the chest was not full of strange treasure or secret documents.

It contained a fluffy rabbit doll, a cat keychain, a chick mug, *etc.*

Armelina recalled the Nun in the inn town who had helped make Mixing requests until recently.

“Yeah, I definitely can’t let anyone see this…”

Nevertheless, she heard some rustling from the bushes behind her. Her shoulders jumped, and she practically tackled the treasure chest of secrets to slam it shut before turning around.

“Wh-who’s there!? Is it Boo Boo? Or Beatrice!? You’ve got it all wrong! This is important reference materials for my research of cultural customs! Okay, fine! I’ll pay you five Medium Obsidian Gears! Goddammit! Have I really done this to myself *again* so soon after the selfie practice!?”

The civil servant found herself in as pathetic a crisis as someone who tried to project their presentation on the conference room wall and instead displayed an image from their private collection, but she was surprised to find that it was not the Iberian Orc or the red Holy Swordswoman watching her.

Something else entirely stood from the bushes while apologetically scratching its head.

“Sorry. I saw everything.”

“Gnyaaahhh!? A talking skeletoooon!!”

Part 3

On the roof of Boo Boo’s leaf house, half of a Bucket Ostrich Egg was placed upside down to form a ceiling and a stick was used to prop up one side as an

entrance.

The humidity was trapped inside, creating a Fairy sauna.

Such saunas were used as secret discussion spots. It was technically used to get people to spill the beans by preventing someone from thinking too much. Otherwise they could dodge the issue forever after they were summoned…or that was how their culture did things, anyway.

However, the egg sauna was currently occupied by Meridiana, who lived at the leaf house without permission, and her little sister Alice. They had turned themselves into cabbage rolls by wrapping beautifying Super Sweet Leaves around themselves like bath towels.

Meridiana's leaf was red and Alice's was yellow. Bigger leaves were better for cooking, but they searched out smaller ones to wrap around their bodies. And how the leaves were heated changed their sweetness, so anyone who knew what they were doing would set adjust the heating for their skin and personal preferences. The leaves were hand-shaped, so it was a little tricky to wrap them up like a cabbage roll.

That was why Meridiana had a single leaf wrapped around her like a standard bath towel while Alice had two less-sweet leaves pasted together, one on the front and one on the back. The trick was to cut holes in the back for their wings.

The older sister leaned forward and peered up at her little sister's expression. She did not seem to notice the sweat gathering in her large cleavage.

"Honestly, I went to the trouble of setting this up and *that's* what you want to talk about, Alice?"

"I-I swear I saw it!"

The heated leaves had absorbed plenty of moisture, so they were plastered to the Fairies' skin and the skin's color faintly showed through. Alice had thought she had recently started growing some curves, but seeing Meridiana with a Crystal Acorn cap on forced her to rethink that.

"You're afraid of ghosts?" Meridiana sounded skeptical. "At your age???"

With thin ivy tying her purple hair into twintails, Alice's face grew red for

reasons other than the sauna.

There were undead beings in Ground's Nir, such as Will-o'-the-Wisps and Zombies, but a lot of people questioned if they had any connection to previously living individuals. It was thought they were simply a species that looked like that.

"That's not what I said! It was a Skeleton! A proper Nonhuman!"

"If it's a proper species, then just ignore it."

"That's not the point! Uuuh, those undead types are scary in a different way. What I'm saying is…"

The sisters had colorful leaves wrapped around their bodies at the moment, but Meridiana recalled her younger sister's normal outfit. Since she wore twintails despite having short hair, her purple head looked like a candy wrapper and she wore a short, almost violet-colored dress with a wide open back. The skirt was cut along either side in an attempt at sexiness, but her body had not quite developed enough to match. Alice was still quite childish as she desperately asked for advice about her ghost story, but then the voice of the leaf house's owner rang up from below.

"Yummy! This chicken is yummy! Even the bones are yummy!"

"Ah, ahh! You can't, Boo Boo! You're not supposed to eat the bones when you have fried chicken!"

"Fish bones are small and pointy, so they prickle, but chicken ones are fine. They're nice and crunchy! Yummy bones!!"

The mood was entirely ruined.

Perhaps because the sauna was keeping her from thinking, one of the two with soaked leaves clinging to their bodies let out a yell. It was Alice with her 4 thin dragonfly-like wings.

"Curse that pig-face! This is an important discussion and he's ruining everything!!"

"Stop that, Alice! You mustn't speak that way about the person who rescued all Fairies without asking for anything in return! And it's only because we're in Boo Boo's territory that we can relax in this sauna on a roof when we're so far

down on the food chain. How can you be so ungrateful!?”

Alice shrank down after her older sister scolded her.

But as she rubbed her sweaty thighs together and fidgeted, she did not seem to have accepted her sister’s argument.

“Uuh…uuuh…”

“Alice?”

“You didn’t used to be like this. You never come home anymore, so why don’t you just go ahead and marry that Iberian Orc!?”

“Bff! U-um, Alice, uh, I think that would be skipping, well, *several* steps, and it would only make things really complicated with Beatrice and Lady Sutriona. Blush, blush. Eh heh heh…!!”

“Uuh, uuh!! I hope you get caught by the Skeleton and turned into bones! Wahhhhh!!”

Alice refused to listen and flew out of the egg sauna while still only protected by the yellow leaves plastered to the front and back of her body.

“Ahh! That girl forgot her clothes! And what does she mean ‘turned into bones’!?”

Meridiana had no choice but to leave the sauna, wash off the sweat, dry herself off with a large piece of cotton fluff, put on her clothes, and head out in search of her little sister. But then…

“Oh?”

When she looked down form the leaf house’s roof, she noticed a guest approaching Boo Boo’s house.

“There really is a Skeleton guest?”

Part 4

“Yeah, sorry, sorry! The mountain’s really changed in the short time I’ve been gone. I had no idea someone had a house here. I wasn’t trying to spy or anything!! (But I can’t deny it was entertaining.)”

The leaf house’s visitor was a complete skeleton. He removed his cowboy hat with a large red jewel on it and scratched his smooth head as he made excuses. He of course had no lungs or vocal cords. Armelina had joined Beatrice and Filinion and none of them knew how he was producing his voice.

And since he was only bones, he apparently could not eat or drink. He had not touched the Fruit Steamed Bun that Boo Boo gave him, so it was now in the stomach of the White Witch who had snatched it up with both arms.

“You are very rude.”

“Ih’m ambidehtroush. Gulp. When we have a hot pot, I’ll dual-wield chopsticks to swipe all the meat in crab mode.”

“You’re kind of proving his point, cow.”

Beatrice’s scolding fell on deaf ears.

Meanwhile, Boo Boo curiously viewed the bone man. He was afraid of ghosts, but a Skeleton with a physical body was apparently not a problem. Perhaps anything was fine as long as he could speak with it.

“Hm? Oh, this? It’s a Skill we Skeletons can use. To put it in a way humans can understand, I guess it’s like psychokinesis. The bones vibrate to produce the voice. I don’t have any muscles or cartilage, so how did you think I was holding the bones together and walking around?”

Whatever the case, he was an incredibly cheerful corpse. He would pick up on their questions and answer them before they even asked them. He could hold a proper conversation, they could communicate with him, and they could tell what he was going to do next, so he did not seem at all like a horror movie monster.

He cracked his neck joint(?) as he continued.

“Tselika’s hideout – or her treasure storehouse, I guess it really is – should be around here somewhere, but I wonder how she’s doing. Ground’s Nir can seem large, but it’s actually pretty small. I thought I’d run across her if I just wandered

around, but maybe I should leave a note on the door. After gathering such a large collection, she must check on that treasure periodically."

"…!? Did you say Tselika!?"

The red Holy Swordswoman felt all her hair bristling. Tselika was the pure white demon who had bound the star student Gruagach with Shining Weapon armor and a blood and herb oil mixture, sent shockwaves through both the real world and Ground's Nir, and continued to live in hiding on Earth despite being a Ground's Nir-born Succubus. She was a symbol of undeniable defeat for Beatrice, who was the representative member of the level cap adventurers who were the strongest of the humans.

Just once, Tselika had wanted to see the cherry blossoms with her dead beloved.

That was the only desire in her heart as that true calamity had made an enemy of two worlds and still grasped victory. That demon lord's rank had been increased to that of a Break News, a paradox with a soul.

"That's right." But the Skeleton cheerfully confirmed what he had said. "Tselika's my wife. Although a beauty like that's wasted on a worthless guy like me."

Part 5

"Well, that was certainly something."

After an encounter that was like a storm blowing through, the Skeleton had left and red Holy Swordswoman Beatrice breathed a heavy sigh.

He should have been someone from the distance past, someone who only existed in people's memories. And yet he had broken right through those bitter feelings and appeared in person. It was a reminder that this was a different world where Earth's laws did not apply.

What would Tselika have done if this Skeleton had arrived just a little sooner? Her feelings for her beloved had left her so attached to Earth that they could never be reunited now. It could only be called one of destiny's ironies.

Meanwhile, the skeleton had been carefree:

"Well, my wife was always quick to jump to conclusions. And once she'd jumped to her conclusion, she'd charge straight down that path with the force of a battering ram. Sorry about all that. She looks like a proper lady, but she gets downright terrifying when she's mad. I know that all too well from that time she suspected I was cheating on her. Anyway, as long as I know she's doing well, nothing else matters. I've got a limitless amount of time, so I'm sure I'll bump into her eventually as I wander around. Ah hah hah hah!!"

Filinion, the White Witch with fluffy blonde hair and glasses, must have felt exhaustion bearing down on her shoulders just from remembering what had happened because she curled up her back a little.

"It's like he looks at things on an entirely different scale from us. I really don't want to imagine what they were like when they were in full lovey-dovey mode. They'd have to be like the eye of the storm…"

"By the way," cut in Armelina. "Why are we working so hard to get Boo Boo to take a bath?"

This was the result of one thing leading to another.

First of all, there was a river near Boo Boo's house. A hot spring apparently ran by directly below, so digging into the dirt on the riverbank produced hot water which could be mixed with the river water to make a bath at one's preferred temperature. Fairy Queen Sutriona had taken quite a liking to it.

But Boo Boo was not a bath-taker. That may have been normal enough for a wild animal, but Beatrice was not going to accept that. If Nonhumans had to be categorized as either people or animals, she wanted to place them on the "people" side of things. Also, she wanted him to take a bath to rid him of as much of his bestial smell as possible. But she also wanted to flirt with him without anyone interfering.

Then Beatrice had been treating Boo Boo to some fried food since he was still

not all that accustomed to using fire and had never eaten any. That led to the comment that Meridiana and Alice had overheard about him eating the chicken bones. (Technically, it was a Snack Chicken from Ground's Nir.)

On top of all that, the oil used for frying could be made into soap.

After seeing Object X for the first time in his life, Boo Boo had naturally asked his knowledgeable friend about it like he always did.

"Boo. Beatrice, what is that tool used for?"

Now that she was outside in only a bath towel, Beatrice triumphantly clenched her fist. The bath towel itself was easily made from the gigantic sandbag-like cocoon of the Large Deceptive Silkworm. They were sold in the inn town for people visiting the hot springs in the northern mountains.

"Perfect! My intellect wins this round!! So c'mon, Boo Boo, I'll teach you everything you need to know. I'll cover your entire body in bubbles. Ah ha ha ha ha!!"

"S-squeal!!"

When the tearful Iberian Orc was shoved into the hot spring made by digging up the dirt and guiding the hot water and river water together, most of the water splashed out, but Beatrice did not care. As threatened, she made an all-out attack with soap and a large washing leaf. The bursting white bubbles both covered Boo Boo and splashed onto her own cheeks, dripped down from her chin, slipped down into the cleavage between her barely-above-average breasts, and…well, it was an *interesting* sight, but she was too busy laughing to notice.

Armelina stared into the distance as she helped out while wearing a headband around her forehead as well as some bath clothes just like Beatrice. Hers was a two-piece, with one piece wrapped around her chest and the other around her hips, and her skin was flushed from the steam.

"Now this is scary. Is this what a girl is willing to do when she falls madly in love? I feel like I'm watching someone start out at practicing tarot and end up handing over every yen they own to rely on the divine. It's such a slippery slope you can't even see the individual steps along the way."

"Well, I'm willing to help if it will get rid of that stench. Actually, why do you

have such trouble with baths, Boo Boo? Do you not like getting wet?”

“Boo. When I stay in the bath too long, my nose gets all damp and my mind dulls over. The way I zone out feels dangerous.”

“Um, so do you get overheated too easily? Then what about a cold bath?”

“He’d obviously catch cold then. Get it together, Filinion! Then his nose would get stuffed up and he would zone out just the same.”

“C’mon, that’s why we decided on a hot bath.”

Filinion laughed while showing off her bright skin. Instead of a towel, she wore something like a hairpin carved from wood and bath clothes that looked a like a *juban* (and did an impressive job of revealing her curves when wet).

“And what’s with all those different kinds of body oil? I know they don’t have that much variety in the inn town.”

“Ho ho ho. That’s the privilege of being a Mixer, Armelina. I have sensitive skin, so I can’t just scrub away like we can with Boo Boo.”

“Then can you use one of your fancy recovery potions to do something about Beatrice who has way too much dopamine pumping through her veins? I doubt just letting her smell a Wide Awake Mint would bring her back to her senses. She’s probably planning to keep Boo Boo soaking in the hot spring for 2 or 3 days.”

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!! Ha ha ha ha ha ha

late. Boo Boo grabbed his loincloth which was sitting nearby, escaped the hot spring, and fled into the deep forest.

In her two-piece bath clothes, (flaaaat) Armelina rubbed her temple.

“See, didn’t I tell you?”

“Oh, no! Boo Boo will catch cold like this!”

“Please put some clothes on before you chase after him! Is everyone here a nudist!?”

As they argued, the three of them summoned their Percentage-type Magic, which took the form of their armor and clothing, below their bath clothes. Beatrice removed her bath towel as if it burst off from within.

“Okay, which way did Boo Boo go?”

“As big as he is, we’ll find him soon enough no matter where he went.”

Part 6

Having carelessly fled into the deep forest without her clothes, the palm-sized Fairy named Alice crafted herself a makeshift dress from some handy leaves and sticky mushroom hyphae. As a teenage girl, she felt the need to accessorize it with some small fruits.

Fairy work was frighteningly detailed and quick.

She tried it on and then made some adjustments to the size and fit. The way it adhered to her chest and caught when she twisted her hips was especially important. If she misread those parts, it could all fall apart as soon as she made any serious movements.

“Sniff, sniff…”

Her vision was blurred by tears. She knew it was rude, but she sniffled.

The clothes of course did not really matter. The only thing on her mind was the

incident with her older sister Meridiana. Why was Meridiana so obsessed with that Iberian Orc? Did she really not intend to come home? It was true that Iberian Orc had saved both Alice's older sister and all of the Fairies. She was thankful for that. When her older sister had said she was offering her life up to that 1000-meter dragon, no one in the village had stopped her. Neither had Alice, the sister who shared her blood. She found it amazing that Boo Boo had faced and repelled the Thousand Dragon on his own to rescue Meridiana. It made him sound like a character from a picture book.

But these were two different things.

If her older sister was not returning home, hadn't she just changed to whom she was sacrificing herself?

Alice was so busy thinking about it all that she grew careless of her surroundings.

"Ah."

At first, she thought something had grabbed the 4 wings on her back and tugged on them. But that was not what had happened.

It was a Ground Spider web that almost seemed to vanish into the air.

"No, this stupid thing…"

It was the same as a landmine: You had to watch out for it before stepping on it. Once you stepped on it, it was too late. Alice knew that, but she still swung her arms and legs around on reflex. Each movement only got the tiny Fairy further caught in the net-like web, pinning her in place.

And the vibrations on the taut threads summoned the web's maker.

A far-too-giant spider appeared from behind the nearby tree trunk where it was lying in wait.

"Kyaaa

There was nothing she could do. Even if Meridiana came swooping in now, there was nothing she could do either.

And yet…

“Boo! Boo!! I can’t think straight!!”

“Wha-?”

There was no time for surprise. The entire tree trunk snapped. The foundation that supported the Ground Spider, held up the web, and captured Alice utterly collapsed.

“Mumble, mumble. Beatrice shouldn’t be able to find me here. Squeal. I need to go wait this out in the Cave of Tears. I only go there when sad things happen, but I’ll have to break that rule now.”

He had not even noticed.

Alice had been rescued. She was caught on Boo Boo’s head along with the spider web, but she finally realized this was no time to zone out.

(My enemy! He is my sworn enemy!! He’s the bad guy who stole my sister!!)

She tried to fly away, but her 4 thin dragonfly wings were still tangled in the spider web and refused to function. The web got caught on another branch and she found herself dangling upside-down.

“I’ll gather a few Drawing Stones. Then I won’t be bored in the cave.”

Boo Boo remained oblivious to the end and he left while muttering encouragement to himself.

Left behind as the upside-down Hanged Man, Alice held the skirt of her leaf dress and screamed.

“Wahhhh! He’s mean in everything he does! Stupid sister-stealing Boo Boo!!”

“Now, I think you’re pushing it a little with that complaint. Well, perhaps you’re just distracting yourself from the fact that you couldn’t save your sister yourself.”

It happened suddenly.

Someone rudely commented on Alice’s heartfelt lament.

“Eh? Wah! Gyaaaaahh!? U-Un-Undead! Why is a Skeleton here!?”

She jumped in shock despite dangling upside-down and that only got her further tangled in the spider web. The web wrapped tightly around her and squeezed at her budding breasts. As the upside-down Fairy began spinning around and around, the cowboy hat skeleton spoke up in exasperation.

“I’d be more worried about the spider web than your questions. It would be a disaster if you tugged too hard and tore your wings off, wouldn’t it?’

“Tremble tremble tremble.”

“You only just realized that was possible? Here, I’ll use some of the Sap Oil dripping from the trees around here. Get that on the spider web and it’ll peel right off, so don’t move. We don’t want to damage your wings, so let’s take it nice and slow.”

Despite the frightening possibilities he hinted at, he used his bony fingers to gently rub at Alice’s leaf dress and easily removed the spider web. But he only made it look easy. If Alice was alone, she might have forced them off and badly hurt her 4 wings.

The bone man spoke as he watched the tiny Fairy lick her index finger and quickly care for her thin wings.

“Now, since you spoke all your concerns aloud, let me give you some advice. Your sister’s life belongs to her, so you need to let her do what she wants with it. No one’s forcing her to do this and she isn’t being a nuisance to anyone, right? Besides, the desire to repay a debt is a sign that she still has unresolved feelings inside her, right? Force her back now and I guarantee you that you won’t have your ‘usual sister’ back. You’ll have an entirely different person who is irritated year-round by the regrets you didn’t let her deal with.”

“Who do you think you are!? A bunch of bones doesn’t get to pretend he understands my sister!!”

“Oh, you’ve got a mouth on you. If you ask me, you don’t need to be the same species as someone to talk about them. My wife isn’t human, but no one can list off her good points better than me. Not even Tselika herself.”

“I don’t care about some old man’s memories!”

“That’s taking it too far, you brat! Besides, Fairies are an eternally growing species, so you don’t have a lifespan! You might look cute, but I bet you’ve lived several times as long as me!”

“I-I was told to watch out for old men who readily call you cute…”

“Calling you cute was enough to shake you? Now I’m really worried for you!!”

Alice fluttered cautiously around the Skeleton for a while, but she finally started back toward Fairy territory.

The Fairy village was normally hidden away among trees that were especially old and large even for this thick forest, but she heard a great cacophony from there now.

The Fairies had been so late in thanking Boo Boo that their plans for finally doing so had only grown bigger and bigger.

But palm-sized Alice pouted her lips, used her 4 wings to hover in place, and tilted her head.

“Hmm. Will this really repay our debt to him?”

Part 7

When Beatrice pursued Boo Boo into the deep forest, she was taken aback by the scene that appeared before her far too suddenly.

“Th-that’s strange. I was here just a week ago and this definitely wasn’t here!”

The thick forest was cut off by a large fence and there was an arch-shaped sign at what looked like a front gate. Inside, a mine cart rail snaked around, a tower rose toward the heavens, and something like a giant water wheel spun above the ground.

White Witch Filinion pushed at the left side of her glasses.

“The way they’re all made of wood is frightening, but isn’t that mine cart rail a

roller coaster, isn't that tower a freefall ride, and isn't that giant water wheel a Ferris wheel?"

"And look what it says on the arch at the main entrance…"

"B-Boo Boo Land?"

It was all utterly incomprehensible, but the gray pig face next to the text did indeed look like that Iberian Orc. Through the arch was a plaza with a fountain in the middle and that fountain was decorated with a giant pig-faced monument. In fact, the pillar of water erupted from the top of the pig face like a whale.

There were food stands on either side of the plaza, but they were far too large for the palm-sized Fairies. In fact, they were too large even for human-sized Beatrice. They seemed to be serving skewers of Master Rabbit and Sliced Fish dunked in tubs of yogurt sauce and allowed to ferment, but that may have been the perfect feast for an Iberian Orc. The smell of fermentation was powerful even from a distance, so it may have been a way of inducing the state of "nearly rotten" which he would consider the most delicious. The Fairy that lived at the leaf house had taken part in Boo Boo's birthday party, so they may have done their research.

Bewildered, Beatrice and the other two tilted their heads, but then a small light fluttered in front of them.

Meridiana may have taken a cold bath because her hair was wet.

"Oh, is this where you were?"

"Meridiana?"

Her shyness was still going strong, so the tiny Fairy smiled at them but still kept out of arm's reach. That seemed to be something of a habit, so she could not help it. The look on her face made it clear she was not displeased to see them.

"I was stopping by to deliver the dress my little sister Alice left behind. I was relieved to find she made it back to the village on her own."

"So what's the deal with all this?"

"Please, come in. It's already 90% complete."

They stepped through the main entrance's arch and felt like they had yet again

stepped into another world. Small lights were flitting around, so the entire village of Fairies seemed to be hard at work. Since Meridiana could construct Boo Boo-sized furniture in a single night, they were clearly very good at this sort of thing.

As they continued to tilt their heads, a gray pig costume walked past. It was not exactly delightful when they realized it had to be filled with palm-sized Fairies.

“For a better idea of how this came about, it would probably be best to ask the elder. Lady Morgan!”

The Fairy flew off to hand this off to someone more important than her. Beatrice and the others followed and were guided to something like a lampshade made from flower petals.

A bathtub even smaller than a bento box sat inside and Morgan had stripped off her clothes to soak in the sticky pink liquid filling it. It seemed to be more about sterilization than bathing, so she occasionally scooped it up in her hands and dumped it over her head.

“Oh, there you are. You sure do like baths, Lady Morgan.”

“Mh? If we have guests, you need to inform me sooner, Meridiana. I apologize for forcing you to see this.”

Upon noticing the humans, Morgan left the tub and let her Fairy attendants dry her. She was known as an elder, but her skin was smooth and spotless as the liquid was wiped away from her back and butt. Her attendants then dressed her in her underwear and orange dress.

“I will redo the process later. We must take every precaution before weaving Ground Spider silk. Otherwise we get tangled in the sticky threads.”

As she spoke, she checked some kind of readings on the rectangular window-like displays that appeared around her. Instead of Magic, this was a combination of light-reflecting pollens.

“We are in the middle of our work, so I ask that you forgive our poor manners. I might be the elder, but even I must work up a sweat to put a smile on Sir Boo Boo’s face!”

The first one to sigh was a fellow Fairy: Meridiana.

“See? Silly, isn’t it? But this kind of festive mood gathers more support for her, so we all tend to get carried away.”

“Mh… Lady Sutriona put me in charge and I am the only Fairy capable enclosing the four spirits’ blessing in objects, so that is no way to speak about me, Meridiana. Surely you understand our rules. Rudeness of that caliber must be punished by a full body soaking in Tree Hollow Honey.”

“But Boo Boo spends half his day searching for food, so it’s hard for him to even prepare a day off for something like this…”

“…”

“That’s why I’m much cleverer for repaying him over time in a way that doesn’t interfere with his lifestyle. My help is much more useful to him. Heh heh heh.”

“(Min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min, min!!)”

“Gyahh!? Shut up! Just because you don’t have an argument is no reason to deafen me by rubbing your cicada wings together, Lady Morgan!!”

“(Jii jii) …Pipe down. I did not *say* anything.”

The elder childishly puffed out her cheeks as she ended her cicada chirping attack. Feeling worn down (from being caught in that bizarre argument), Beatrice finally managed to get a word in edgewise.

“Umm, so what exactly are you trying to do here?”

The Holy Swordswoman got right to the point, so Morgan answered while fanning her body with her hand to cool herself after the bath.

“It is simple. A fair bit of time has passed since the Thousand Dragon incident, but we have not yet been blessed with an opportunity to properly thank Sir Boo Boo. Ours is a culture of repaying debts, so it would damage our dignity to delay any longer. Sir Boo Boo appears to have enough food and he has no real fixation on weapons or tools. …That is why we decided to fulfill a demand that is not normally a part of his life.”

“That isn’t normally a part of his life?”

“Yes. Namely, entertainment. We have constructed the truly stylish Boo Boo Land!!!!!”

She crossed her arms and gathered strength in her gut to make her announcement in as booming a voice as she could manage, but Beatrice’s group was unsure how to react.

“I-I’m surprised you even know what an amusement park is.”

“Oh, that. Lady Sutriona says that studying humans is the best way to learn about methods of killing time. We will not underestimate you humans. And since our queen will often shirk her duti-…”

“Lady Morgan.”

“…Ahem. And since she will often leave to observe the human inn town, she has learned much about your culture. By borrowing some of that knowledge, it is entirely possible for us to construct the amusement park of a foreign land.”

Morgan made it sound obvious, but it was actually quite impressive. It may have been even more impressive than the amusement parks humans made from steel and electricity. If everything, including the power sources, was entirely Ground’s Nir-made, then how were the roller coaster and freefall ride moving? Were they using “springs” made from plant vines or animal hairs? Or were they using the natural power of wind or water? It felt like seeing the large siege weapons used to chuck giant rocks at castles in ancient times, so Beatrice was kind of excited.

(I don’t see any metal screws or nails at all. If this entire amusement park is made from cleverly arranged wood, then their construction techniques might even outdo our human ones.)

“Wait, wait, wait, wait.”

Beatrice was impressed by the Fairies’ presentation, but someone else interrupted.

It was Filinion, the glasses cow who understood nothing of romance.

“Um, are you saying this was like a game of telephone passing from the humans to Sutriona, from Sutriona to Morgan, and from Morgan to the rest of

the Fairies? And even Sutriona at the second link has never actually seen a real amusement park?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Could this be…um, extremely dangerous?”

“???”

Still unsure what she was getting at, Beatrice tilted her head along with the Fairies.

She was instantly snapped back into reality when she heard something incredibly heavy crashing into the ground.

“Wh-what? Did a shooting star hit!?”

“Hmm, I think that was more like a microbus falling from a 10-story building…”

Armelina must have been able to link actual physics equations to the sound of destruction, and then the humans hesitantly looked behind them.

Dust was billowing out a few dozen meters away. It was at the bottom of the tower rising toward the heavens…so had there been an accident at the freefall ride?

“H-hey!? Is everyone okay!? Was anyone hurt!?”

“Please wait, Beatrice. Shouldn’t all the Fairies be more concerned about this?”

Beatrice noticed it now that the White Witch pointed it out. There was a lot of noise around them, but none of it had a tense or tragic edge to it. It was more like the atmosphere on the eve of a festival when everyone was trying to enjoy themselves.

“But it is strange.” Elder Morgan sounded curious as she floated near Beatrice’s shoulder. “Why do humans enjoy things like that? Well, if it’s meant to be fun, it only makes sense to pull out all the stops.”

“No, wait, what are you saying?”

The Holy Swordswoman frantically tried to correct the Fairy, but…

“A freefall. I have heard the point is to enjoy the foolhardy thrill of putting

yourself in danger and supposedly the riders usually scream. But perhaps ours still pales in comparison to the originals in your world."

"……
……
……"

"You there! Make that roller coaster more thrilling. It is supposed to make it feel like you are flying, so it makes no sense to have a continuous track from beginning to end. Remove sections in the middle for about three jumps. That feeling of flying is sure to make Sir Boo Boo rejoice."

"(Beatrice, Beatrice! Please stop staring into the distance! They keep pushing to make this more interesting and with zero safety regulations! And isn't this turning into something like the end of a slaughter house? They're building contraptions that will automatically do *that* to Boo Boo!)"

"And it makes no sense for the Ferris wheel to move so slowly. Start at 20 rotations per beat. If that still isn't enough, we can always spin it faster!"

"(O-oh, dear. The game of telephone messed things up so badly they have no idea what an amusement park is supposed to look like! And on top of that, they can fly around with those wings on their back, so they have no fear of heights or speed, do they? Send Boo Boo into this pop world of fancy, cartoonish characters and he'll be torn to pieces!!)"

The Fairies were acting out of pure naïveté.

As they wiped the sweat from their brows they spoke with pure smiles on their faces.

"Oh, I can already imagine the delight on Sir Boo Boo's face!!

Part 8

Later while Beatrice was exchanging information regarding the Labyrinth at

the inn town, she decided to do some research on the Skeleton while she was at it. She assumed it would be hard asking about someone whose face and name were unknown, but she received results with surprising ease.

That was thanks to Tselika.

She had sent shockwaves through two worlds, so a lot of people had researched her information to either track her down or determine how she committed her crime. That had also revealed some information on her partner.

“I’m not sure if I should call this amazing or absurd…”

At a relatively cheap restaurant, Filinion sounded half-exasperated as she stuck her spoon into a single-portion vegetable hotpot.

“It turns out he was one of the earliest Labyrinth explorers and he was the very person who laid the first stone for the pavement we take for granted here in the inn town.”

Armelina grimaced a bit at the great wave of girliness wafting over from the colorfully green vegetable hotpot, so she ordered a potato and sausage pot-au-feu instead.

“When they carelessly dug up a dragon egg while building the inn town, he supposedly protected his allies by driving off the furious mother dragon in single combat. And afterwards, he insisted the badly wounded mother dragon had done nothing wrong, carried her to an unexplored body of water deep in the mountains known as the Womb Pot, and healed her wounds there. …Who can say how much of it’s true, though.”

The story said that egg had hatched into the Thousand Dragon, so none of it sounded very credible.

“They say he was powerful enough to slay a dragon yet he was not a human supremacist and he was the key figure in creating a Guild for both humans and Nonhumans.” Beatrice sighed quietly as she finished her thought. “Given what happened with Tselika, that part sounds true.”

She thought of the Sage as someone like Einstein or da Vinci whose intellect would not seem behind the times even if they time traveled to the present. Meanwhile, that Skeleton was the opposite: he was a martial genius. No matter

what cutting-edge tactics or optimized wartime propaganda were used against him, they lost their shine against his charisma. He was that kind of fierce commander.

Why had he built the inn town? Because it was easier to have a base.

Why had he dueled the mother dragon? Because he had not wanted his enemies or allies to get hurt.

Why had he created the combined Guild? Because then everyone could smile together.

His path seemed childish, but there was no hint of hesitation there. Every age had to be full of trickery and intrigue, but he stomped through it all with the logic of a child. Every foe that faced him had to have been smiling as they wielded their swords. It had all ended in his defeat and Tselika's rampage, but how had his last moments really played out? Perhaps it was his complete and under lack of complaint or regret that his survivor had been unable to accept.

…And now he had cheerfully shown up at Boo Boo's leaf house as bones, so the world really was an odd place. If Tselika learned of this, she might just find a way to punch him.

However.

While the dangerous and deadly Boo Boo Land amusement park was under construction, the Iberian Orc seemed to have detected a unique scent.

When Beatrice's group visited, he spoke to them in his leaf house.

"B-boo… I can't seem to relax. I feel uneasy, like you're still plotting something."

"I'm not."

"I'm not letting my head go all fuzzy! I'll never ever ever get near one of those hot springs again!"

"I'll make it work!! I swear I will!!"

Exploration of the Labyrinth had stalled lately. Water Gate 22 was full of countless intersecting waterways and you would end up destroying your allies if you did not properly understand the system behind the many switches and

water gates. Not long before, Beatrice's switch had dumped Boo Boo into a giant water source. As the Holy Swordswoman had clasped her hands and apologized, a bucket of water had been dumped right on her head. The system was apparently more complex than Switch A always opening Water Gate A, so they had to start by hitting all the switches en masse to gather data on the random number calculations. And no one wanted to be the guinea pig.

Fluffy blond -haired glasses Filinion sighed in exasperation.

"Hmm. I think this might have something to do with fundamental compatibility."'

"Ho ho? How convenient for you. Can we get a comment from today's negative MVP who nearly drowned us all when she pressed a floor switch with that giant ass that often goes unnoticed thanks to those giant boobs?"

"I-I already apologized for that! How was I supposed to know there was a switch right next to the Banana Octopus sneaking along the floor! Who would expect a switch on the floor there!?"

"We will never forget exactly where that Banana Octopus got caught on your body when you slipped and fell right on your ass. Isn't that right, fatty butter boobs girl?"

"Do I need to bring out a memory-erasing potion, Beatrice!?"

Armelina spoke up while keeping some mental distance from the other two to avoid a similar punishment from the annoying cow.

"Well, Beatrice is a poor match when it comes to water and Boo Boo is a little too cautious when it comes to water. Is the hot spring incident still affecting you? You've seen that Water Gate 22's waterways aren't hot, right?"

"Boo… I don't think you need to soak in water to polish your body. If you cover yourself with fine sand and then rub a rock over it, you'll be nice and shiny!"

"Boo Boo, most people would liken that to sandpaper or a file."

Beatrice tried to correct his mistake, but then the less-than-bright (despite wearing glasses) cow said something entirely unnecessary.

"But if you've always lived in the natural world, anywhere warmer than body

temperature probably would seem weird.”

“Come to think of it, Boo Boo doesn’t worry much about clothes and doesn’t use a blanket when he sleeps.”

“…Huh? Does that mean he’s a terrible match for Beatrice, the strongest fire user?”

Beatrice then shouted “I’ll kill you, cow!!!!!!” in a voice most girls would have avoided in front of a gentleman.

Someone chuckled as they listened to the conversation.

It was the undead type of Nonhuman who had started visiting the leaf house on occasion: the Skeleton wearing a cowboy hat with a large red stone on it.

“A water gate floor, huh? That really takes me back. You use different names, but it’s possible similar structures are appearing and disappearing as time goes by.”

“Hm? You dealt with this in your era too???”

“Well, something similar. When I was a human, it was a blast furnace area instead of a waterway one. Whenever someone flipped a switch, it was complete pandemonium, so we started fighting amongst ourselves and ignoring the Gimmicks and Traps! Hah hah!!”

“Ugh. Am I the only one that doesn’t see anything about that to laugh about?”

Beatrice’s group was delving into the Labyrinth to fight back against the Pieces that would bring negative technological revolutions to the real world and to free the Iberian Orc souls saved as data in Boo Boo’s giant Shining Weapon.

They had enough reason to hurry, but they could not rush and get themselves killed. They felt bad saying so in front of the Skeleton who was still living(?) as he saw fit, but they could not take this so lightly.

And as her thoughts turned to him, another “living legend” came to mind, causing Beatrice to narrow her eyes.

A certain name came to anyone’s lips when they thought deeply about Magic. No matter your starting point, you would always end up at that person.

“…The Sage, huh?”

“Hm?”

“They’re the person who led to Magic being introduced to the world and to the construction of the first Gate. Some say they were actually the very first Piece. I wonder if they would be able to reach the bottom of the Labyrinth without issue…”

They were seen as an unreachable figure in the sky and yet also someone people expected could do actual work on the ground. They were a genius a lot like Einstein or da Vinci. If they had been born in a different age or somehow arrived in the present, would they be mocked as behind-the-times? No, it was the rest of the world that would have trouble keeping up. The world had spent so much time growing beyond them, but would anyone be able to understand what those geniuses were saying? Their intellect completely ignored the flow of time. That was how Beatrice viewed the Sage.

And even though she had not really noticed it until now, the incident from the other day had thrown off her sense of equilibrium.

Tselika had rampaged through Tokyo and ignored all else on her way to Ebisu.

The demon had only wished to see some cherry blossoms, but Beatrice had suspected she was after the Ministry of Defense Technology Laboratory where the Sage or someone who could contact them was rumored to be.

What if Tselika really had gone to the Ministry of Defense Technology Laboratory?

Or what if Beatrice had had enough time to take a detour there?

It was only a hypothetical, but she could not help but think about how that might have sent the world in a different direction altogether.

“Squeal…”

She heard snoring. Boo Boo was nodding off while still sitting. This always happened when he sensed them starting on an even somewhat complicated subject. But they could continue speaking just fine as long as his snoring did not reach catastrophic levels.

Beatrice smiled bitterly as she continued.

“Come to think of it, you were active in an era before ours, right?”

“Well, it can be hard to tell since my wife and I are hardly typical, but we got started quite a long time ago. Does the Cuban Missile Crisis mean anything to ladies as young as you? It’s said the Sage suddenly released a thesis on Magic onto the internet, but there was actually a lot going on below the surface before that. We were those who knew about Magic before it was made public. That’s just how the world works. An exciting and thrilling concert tour across the US will be rehearsed for weeks and weeks in advance.”

“Wait. Are you saying…?”

“I was asking if you were from an older era, but are you saying you were part of it before the network was made public? Are you saying you actually met the Sage?”

“Well… I was from the Western group. The Eastern group seems to have stolen the tech and used it for themselves. But it didn’t all come from the Sage. It was complete chaos at the time. We might steal the tech the Eastern group improved after stealing it from us and then we might find everything we’d stolen was a bluff.”

Beatrice’s group exchanged a glance and then looked back to the Skeleton. This man truly was at the same level as Tselika and he was proving to be an unexpected living(?) witness. This information source was incredibly valuable.

In the present, no one knew if the Sage was an individual or a group, but he had seen them. He had seen them in person before they had been blotted out by falsehoods and legends.

If they could contact the Sage, they might be able to skip 3 steps and cut right through the dark clouds spreading from the attack on the Iberian Orc village that was still causing Boo Boo to suffer. They might be able to bring his friends and family back.

“H-hey! So you really do know the Sage? Then will you tell is any little bit you can!? We have a pressing reason and we can tell you what it is!!”

“Hmm…” groaned the Skeleton as he crossed his bone arms and tilted his skull.

If Beatrice and the others had been just a little calmer, they would have noticed the nuance to his voice.

He seemed to be cutting off something instead of responding to the question.

Only Boo Boo seemed to sense something invisible there, causing him to wake up.

Only the Iberian Orc who lived in the wild and thus faced death just to acquire a single meal.

And…

“That’s somewhat…no, that’s definitely something you shouldn’t pursue.”

Beatrice had no idea what had happened. The red jewel glowed and a white storm tore apart the entire scene as it filled her vision from right to left.

By the time she realized that storm was a colossal axe, it was far too late to dodge.

That meant there was another reason she was still alive.

Namely, Boo Boo.

He interfered by throwing a heavy kick toward the giant axe and the Skeleton’s gut(?).

A heavy, reverberating impact sounded a moment later. The Skeleton broke through the leaf house’s wall and continued flying outside.

Something surged out and flew through the air.

It was Boo Boo’s house, which was essentially a tent made from large tropical leaves. It had been destroyed, and not just because Boo Boo had kicked the Skeleton through it. The white whirlwind that was the gigantic axe had already sliced through it from outside.

She knew that.

She understood that.

The destruction of the home had fully permeated her mind.

And Holy Swordswoman Beatrice exploded in red.

“*Damn yoooooo

“Oh, c’mon. You’ve never heard of this here? It’s part of my wife’s collection and it’s also the key to her treasure storehouse in the back of the Cave of Tears.”

He used a bony finger to tap at the large red stone on his cowboy hat.

“It wasn’t created for that purpose, though. She used to be quite mischievous, you see. The key and everything else in her treasure storehouse are stolen.”

Someone audibly gulped.

It took Beatrice a moment to realize it was her.

“It began as the pinnacle of alchemy and could turn base metals into precious metals. It’s true power was obscured by that symbolism and it’s true value lies in the eternal life provided for its bearer. You might know it as the Philosopher’s Stone, but some refer to it as the Sage’s Stone instead.”

“…!?”

In this case, the fairy tales were irrelevant.

The Sage. He had spoken that name. In fact, he was receiving direct benefit from that name.

“That’s why I know very well how fearsome the Sage is. I built a town from scratch and fought a dragon, but the Sage alone was too much for me. Once you contact them, you will find a true despair without even death as an escape. If you don’t want to end up like this, then back off.”

The sea of bones pulled the cowboy hat low over his eyes and gave them some advice.

“And this is a good opportunity. I’ll be retrieving anything that might lead someone to the Sage. That’s all I’ll do this time. I’ll let you go free. Yes…for now, I’ll be taking the gigantic Shining Weapon that Iberian Orc has. Hand it over and I won’t take your lives.”

Beatrice did not understand anything that was happening.

Who or what was the Sage? How was this Skeleton connected to the Sage? Why would he not let them approach the Sage? Was there a secret there which forced this Skeleton to transform like this?

But the biggest question of all was one she had to answer no matter what.

“Why would you bring up Boo Boo’s Shining Weapon now?”

“Huh?”

“This precious Shining Weapon holds the digitized souls of his friends and family. At the same time, it’s the weapon used to attack his village that was given to him by one of those behind the attack. …Why would you want it? I thought you were trying to erase all information leading to the Sage!?”

“Oops.” The Skeleton made a show of reaching for the top of his cowboy hat and replied without actually answering the question. “Oh, *I think you already know the answer to that.*”

There was no sound. But the silver-and-red-haired girl definitely saw Boo Boo’s face distort like a child on the verge of tears.

“…”

Her blood boiled. Upon reaching the answer, the Holy Swordswoman stopped even trying to control her fire.

“So it was them? You’re saying the owner of that Shining Weapon and the one who purged the Iberian Orc village…was the Saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaage!!!???”

Part 9

They were surrounded on all sides by a sea of bones. The Skeleton towering up in the center rested a giant bone axe on his shoulder.

“Wait, Beatrice!!”

Even the cries of a nearby friend sounded distant to her now.

She was single-mindedly focused on murdering this man.

She bit her lip, immediately drew her Shining Weapon rapier, and roared.

“Fire Throw!!”

She went with a simple and surefire attack. As soon as she made a horizontal swing of her rapier, flames surged toward the bone man like fresh blood flowing out of a wound in the world itself. At 2000 degrees Celsius, they could melt pure iron. The firepower rivalled that of a crematory furnace, it grew to several dozen meters across, and it flew in straight line like a water gun.

Any who were swallowed up by this attack of rage would be burned and incinerated until nothing remained.

However.

“Yeah, sorry about this.”

“…”

“Even a bone body would be destroyed in flames hotter than a cremation, but you need to be more careful. The smoke made from burning human remains isn’t very good for you. You might have 100% Fire Resistance, but what about your buddies?”

There was no hint of pain or fear in his voice.

Could he even feel pain without any nerves? He might be just fine and he might have been putting on a brave face. However, Beatrice did not have time to find out which it was.

At this rate, he would push back.

Once he was in range, he would use his bone axe to lop off her head.

“Like I’ll let you!” roared Armelina.

She activated her Shining Weapon metal rod and summoned a giant steel fist to the end. It was a simple physical attack. She slammed it into the cowboy Skeleton with the dreadful speed and mass of a head-on collision with a car.

It was truly like an iron fist.

It was like the battering ram wielded by several people to break down a mansion’s front door during a raid. The solid sound was just like several bowling pins being knocked away. Instead of a specific part of his body, the entire

Skeleton shattered.

However.

“Hah hah hah.”

“Wha-…!?”

Armelina watched in shock as the Skeleton laughed. The cowboy hat skull had shattered and every one of his joints had fallen apart.

Nevertheless, a portion of the white sea rose up like nails gathered by magnetism. A headless skeleton stood there. It finally picked up a new skull from the ground and attached it to its neck. The terribly skinny bone fingers grabbed the cowboy hat and placed it on its smooth white head.

And it spoke with the exact same voice as before.

“Is this really so surprising? I never had any organs or blood. I had no heart or brain. Did you honestly think killing and shattering me would stop me?”

“Burn you…or break you…and you can just put yourself back together!?”

“Filinion, what about your Mixing!?”

“I can’t think of any *official* ingredient Lists that use the human body. I can’t erase him by using him as a Mixing ingredient!”

“Just so you know, poisoning, electrocuting, and drowning me are all meaningless. They’re not very exciting, but bones are pretty damn amazing.”

“No, that can’t be true. You’re different from normal Skeletons!”

“Oh, you want a unique name for me?”

He thought for a moment.

That unique being had the discretion of a human and the life(?) force of a monster.

“Then you can call me Skull Wave. For now, anyway.”

There was no apparent solution.

No amount of attacking would end it.

Boo Boo and Armelina used their great strength to part the bone sea with his

log or steel beam of a Shining Weapon and her steel ball on a chain. However, that did not solve the fundamental problem. They could create a small opening in the sea, but the gap was quickly filled by more bones pushing in like they were challenging the actual ocean.

Beatrice regretted triggering this fruitless conflict.

She felt like she had called in an enemy they were poorly matched for and forced it onto the others.

“Beatrice, use a shockwave! Use your flames to hit them with a different Element!”

“Boo! This is just like fighting the lifeless Gimmicks in the Labyrinth. Beatrice, there’s nothing to fear! Be a leader!!”

“…”

Those words brought clarity back to Beatrice’s blank mind.

She adjusted her grip on the rapier.

“Understood, Boo Boo, Armelina! You help too, Filinion. Mix the potions I tell you to!”

“Th-that’s fine, but I can’t make anything other than recovery potions!”

“We can combine multiple recovery potions by rapidly heating them. Create a powerful acid, and you can dissolve human bone!!”

“Wait, seriously!? That’s not playing fair!!”

The Skeleton…no, Skull Wave shouted hysterically, but there was a note of enjoyment in his voice.

A chill ran down Beatrice’s spine in response.

“But,” he said.

“Wha-!?”

The bone axe multiplied.

It was already taller than he was, but now there were 6 more of them for a total of 7. Beatrice briefly thought it was moving so quickly she was seeing

afterimages, but that was wrong.

It really had multiplied in number.

Skull Wave now had enough bone arms to hold the 6 extra giant axes. They were attached to his shoulder blades and spine, ignoring the concept of joints altogether.

“I have no nerves to be severed and no blood to be spilled. I can link my body together with no concern for normal human movement.”

He swung them. Fiercely. The axes danced every which way as something like a storm of guillotines. The pure difference in numbers shattered the teamwork of the Holy Swordswoman’s group. They had to wholly focus on defense to stay alive.

Even with three level cap adventurers and an Iberian Orc, they could barely hold their ground.

“Hah hah. Incredible! I’m reaching rotation speeds of 700 rpm! These guillotine-class blades are spinning faster than a juicer and you’re still fighting back with a single rapier, level cap girl!?”

“You…!!”

“Hmm, this isn’t just the speed support from your AGI. Oh, I get it. Your 100% Fire Resistance means flames and heat can’t hurt you, so you’re supporting the movements of your arms and legs with explosive blasts. What were you so afraid of that you had to put together this countermeasure? Bullets? Bomb shrapnel?”

“…”

“I can tell even without a Shining Weapon or Magic. It’s a matter of experience.”

He had seen right through it. Not just her next move, but how she was using her Magic and why she had developed that usage. This was undoubtedly a human intelligence that knew Magic well.

“Well, it won’t last long either way. In just a few minutes, your muscles, cartilage, and joints will be crying out in pain. It’s only a prototype technique.”

Once its secrets were revealed, a secret method was nothing of the sort. He

would take advantage of it soon enough.

“Filinion. Give up on the Mixing. How many recovery potions do you have!?”

“A-a few. But we can’t recombine them into an acid!”

“Armelina, Boo Boo. This is going to hurt, but we have recovery potions and it’ll save our lives, so it’s all for the best, right!?”

“Wait, explain what you’re about to-…bgweh!?”

Armelina’s response was cut off by an explosion. Beatrice activated her Magic and caused a large explosion at their feet. But this was not meant to part the bone ocean that would occasionally swell up like a whirlwind. The incredible shockwave was meant to blast them backwards.

They were surrounded on all sides, but the bone ocean was not consistently thick. The thickest portion was directly ahead where the Skeleton stood. Sending more bones there left the other parts thinner.

If they flew over the bone ocean like an artillery shell and left the range of the flying axes, they could escape. The blow slammed against their own bodies, but Filinion had recovery potions.

But it did not all go as planned.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

An odd sound burst out. The great number of bones gathered into a single being. As the Skeleton’s mass grew, the great axes he held also grew longer and heavier.

Beatrice’s group had earned a few dozen meters, but even that distance was swallowed up.

“Your restricted fighting styles don’t apply to me!!”

White shooting stars dropped down along curving paths, like they were drawing out half-moons. Beatrice was helpless as they focused on her.

But a moment later…

“Tch. Boo Boo! Use this as a stepping stone!!”

Armelina changed her priest’s staff into a hexagonal rod. It was taller than she

was and she swung it to provide stable ground below Boo Boo's airborne feet.

Just before the shooting stars caught the Holy Swordswoman's head, his giant form twisted around.

He cleanly placed all his weight in his giant Shining Weapon and struck the white shooting stars and silver tornado head-on.

The gigantic axes shattered. Boo Boo could not negate the momentum, so he broke several trees and rolled along the ground.

Nevertheless, they escaped the white sea.

"Are you okay, Boo Boo!?"

"You should worry about yourself, Beatrice. I'm worried about Armelina too."

"This is no time to be gentlemanly. It throws me off balance. More importantly, fall back. We can't let them surround us again now that we've escaped!"

The forest rustled. No, it was the sea of human bones covering the ground below the trees.

The Skeleton wore a cowboy hat with a large red jewel on it. He was Skull Wave and he most likely had a direct connection to the Sage.

Fluffy blonde haired glasses Filinion gulped as she watched it.

"But where are we supposed to run to? Ground's Nir isn't all that big an island."

They did not have time to answer.

As the white rushed in, Beatrice's level cap group and even Boo Boo immediately chose to retreat.

Part 10

Wearing a cowboy hat with an ominously glowing large red jewel on it, the Skeleton acted like he was sighing as a white sea followed behind him. But since he had no lungs or diaphragm, it was only an empty motion.

“The Sage, huh? That’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time.”

He used something other than his throat to vibrate the air and took a step out from the shredded and collapsed leaf house to enter the thick forest.

“Hm?”

“Oh? What’s a Soviet ghost doing here? Are you done guarding the tomb of the Enter Kosmos?”

She was a plant Break News and the greatest of the Mandragoras. That monster wielded killer soundwaves and could infinitely reproduce, but she was now gently yawning while buried in the field up to just below her chest.

“Honestly, how is it you still reek of sweat as nothing but bones? Don’t I have a right to complain when you ruin this perfect hot spring spa I’d found? Telling me not to would be asking too much.”

“Hmm. So you’d taken a liking to this place, had you?”

“Not just me. A lot of people find it a comfortable place. And you destroyed it for your own purposes. Now, can that empty head of yours comprehend how poor an excuse ‘I didn’t know’ is?”

“You’re really going to fight me?” That skull would certainly have been smiling if it had skin and muscles. “Hey. Your infinite reproduction isn’t as convenient as it looks. After all, plants subsist off of photosynthesis. Once the soil is out of nutrients, you’re done.”

“You’re no different. It would be hard to find someone who doesn’t know what your body is made of.”

“True enough. It would be like moths flying into the flame for the both of us. … But, Miss Plant, which do you think is stronger: nature’s life force or human greed?”

“…”

“On the planet I come from, human greed wins every time. We know we’re

wrapping the noose around our own necks, but we can't stop overfishing and overdeveloping. Your cosmonaut might have called it a blue planet, but it's actually full of dry-colored bald mountains and deserts. Let's hope Ground's Nir doesn't turn out the same way."

His tone was peaceful, but it was enough to silence one of the Break News.

The strength of plants was based in the fact that they were the foundation of the food chain and those higher up the chain would die if they were wiped out. In a long-term battle, sucking all nutrients from the soil was a simple but effective method.

But what if the predator did not care about consequences? What if they were doing everything they could to ignore the inevitable outcome of starving and drying up in a land of bald mountains and deserts? What if they only focused on destroying and consuming all of the blessings before them?

That was beyond what Ileana could deal with.

"What are you trying to do with a desire powerful enough to consume the entire world?"

"I dunno. It's true humans are foolish and sinful enough creatures to ignore a known future, but they're also stupidly kindhearted. They might know the land is drying up, but they'll still seek water for their starving young child whose lips are dry and cracked."

"…"

"I can't let them meet the Sage. Even my empty head knows meeting that person will not make anyone happy."

Part 11

Overwhelming endurance and unbelievable destructive power. Concluding they would gain nothing by facing him head-on, Boo Boo and the others kept

their distance, but where were they to run to?

“Dammit, since Nonhumans like Boo Boo can’t leave through the Gate, we can’t Sign Out to escape to Earth.”

“Pant, pant. Yes, we can’t exactly, pant, leave Boo Boo all alone here. Pant.”

“But it’s true Ground’s Nir isn’t that large. So the sky? If we could contact the Thousand Dragon…”

“…”

They held a strategy meeting while fleeing through the deep forest, but Boo Boo had not said much of anything.

And then…

“Wah!?”

Armelina cried out oddly as she searched the blue sky for a giant dragon. Something large flew by overhead. But could the Holy Swordswomen and the others comprehend that a white explosion had occurred several hundred meters behind them and now the giant axes made from dried human remains were raining down all around them in hundreds if not thousands of pieces?

Only one thing filled their mind.

“Skull Wave!? He’s already making his next move!?”

“E-eek! How many of them are there!? If those Skeletons appear all over the place, we’ll be surrounded in no time!”

“Is it really that convenient? He’s an individual, not a group. He might have tons of resources, but it’s always just the one Skeleton that stands up, right?”

Even if that was correct, the threat was still there. They did not know which of the piles of bones would become Skull Wave, so they had to remain wary of them all.

And…

“…He’s chasing us,” groaned Beatrice as she looked back while running. “The conscious command tower is passing from bone pile to bone pile to catch up, so watch out!”

They could indeed see a distant figure catching up. A skull wearing a cowboy hat was tossed from pile to pile. Sometimes, just the hat was thrown through the air like a UFO or frisbee before being placed on another skull.

This was faster than running on his own legs and any arrangement of bones would function as Skull Wave. The bone puzzle approached as a truly cruel pursuer.

“Tch!”

“It looks like targeting that hat would be worth trying! Toh!”

Armelina used her metal ball and Beatrice her flames to target the cowboy hat skull while they ran, but it skillfully danced out of the way.

The girls did not look pleased. They were doing everything they could to escape, but he had approached enough that their Magic could reach and hit him.

“Running out in the open isn’t enough. He’ll just surround us. We need to use some kind of natural fortress like a cliff or a cave to give him only one route in. Even if he has a million Skeletons, he can only fight with one at a time if the gap is only big enough for one. Just like the Labyrinth passageways, we can rack up the damage in no time while he’s slowed down!!”

“Pant, pant. B-but is there anywhere like that around here, you map moron!?”

“Ah.”

As they argued, Beatrice gave a hysterical cry.

She saw something through the trees up ahead: a giant round monument modeled after a gray pig face. She also saw a roller coaster mine cart track, a freefall tower, and a giant water wheel Ferris wheel.

The artificial structures looked out of place this deep in the woods. And she could sum it all up with a single name:

“Boo Boo Land?”

The Fairies had secretly built that amusement park to thank Boo Boo. However, it was based on hearsay on top of hearsay, so they failed to grasp the point of the rides, skipped any sort of safety standards, and created murder rides

with no malicious intent.

The exhausted White Witch's glasses were fogged up from her own heat and she could barely see through them, but she pointlessly pushed at them all the same.

"M-maybe we can escape to there! The fence will block the Skeletons' movements and we might be able to wipe them all out with clever application of the murder rides!!"

"So it's a trap action game? No, a tower defense game? Either way, it sounds like fun!"

They did not need a tricky way to lure him in without letting him know what they were trying to do. Skull Wave was pursuing them, so he would follow them wherever they went.

They saw their way out.

But then something unexpected happened.

Boo Boo came to a sudden stop instead of following them.

"What is it, Boo Boo? Hurry!"

But the Holy Swordswoman's prompting did not get the Iberian Orc to move. He shook his head on the spot.

"I can't go there."

He continued before Beatrice could ask why not.

"He's after my Shining Weapon. If I go in there, it will drag someone else into this. No, it's not just that. I've already gotten you three involved. We should have split up so he would only go after me…"

Beatrice felt the blood rush to her head, but then she remembered something: Skull Wave had destroyed Boo Boo's leaf house.

That tragedy might have still been stuck in his head. He may have been in more pain than he let on. And so he was strongly reluctant to expose others to a similar shock. If that was the alternative, he would face Skull Wave alone.

Beatrice finally realized why he had been so silent.

What about her? Could she let this happen? To her, the Fairies' Boo Boo Land was backwards and comedic. It did not function as a proper amusement park. But at the same time, they had to have put a lot of thought into how they would express their heartfelt thanks. These were tools meant to produce smiles, so could she really use them for combat and destruction, make a mess of the place, and leave only rubble behind just to protect her life?

Had she already forgotten her intense rage after Boo Boo's birthday party had been ruined?

"Boo Boo…"

Her suggestion would work against them.

She knew that, but she accepted that and prepared her heart to speak.

But then…

"What's this? Are you letting some completely misguided worries hold you back, our hero?"

A graceful female voice reached them.

They all looked up and saw a small light on a tree branch. A palm-sized Fairy sat there. Her long lime hair was worn back, she wore an orange dress over her curvy body, and two thin wings grew from her back.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Sir Boo Boo. I am Morgan, the elder who has been left in charge of the Fairies during Lady Sutriona's absence."

The small light fluttered down.

She did not hesitate to approach the 4 meter Iberian Orc's face.

"If you would forgive me for being so forward, I believe you are mistaken about something. Our one and only desire is to be useful to you so we might repay you. You are afraid of destroying Boo Boo Land? You feel bad using it for something other than its intended purpose? You are looking at this entirely wrong. Anything that would assist our hero is best. How you use it is a trivial matter, so long as it is of some use to you. It was built to serve you, so why should you be driven out in fear of using it incorrectly? Are you trying to insult our expression of gratitude?"

The bone sea had to be approaching from behind as they spoke. They did not really have time to stand around like this.

But they all waited on the tiny words from Boo Boo who looked like a small child left behind in an unfamiliar city.

"…But."

Finally, Boo Boo forced some words from his throat while hanging his head so he did not have to look even the small Fairy in the eye.

"But he's after me, this has nothing to do with anyone else, and I'll bring trouble wherever I go."

"So what?"

"We don't know how to defeat Skull Wave, joining forces won't necessarily give us a way, and we might all go down together."

"How is that a problem?"

"How can you say that? Nothing good will come of working with me here…"

The elder pulled down on something like a thread from a spider web that hung nearby.

A giant bucket fell on Boo Boo's head.

"Dboo!?"

"Hmph. This weapon was personally instilled with blessings by the Fairy elder. Let the happiness permeate your being. And is that what you were worried about?"

The tiny elder crossed her arms, scoffed, and spat out her words. At the same time, she spoke like a mother gently stroking her child's head when they had had a bad dream.

"The answer is obvious: everyone here wants to see you smile. Just like you reached out to help Meridiana even though you did not benefit in the slightest."

Boo Boo could not move.

"…This will be a lot of trouble for you."

“It will.”

“It might go way, way beyond the point of no return.”

“It might.”

Something approached from overhead.

It was a giant axe made from countless bones.

But Boo Boo no longer hesitated. As he looked back, he swung his giant Shining Weapon like a whirlwind and shattered the falling axe.

And he spoke briefly.

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

As the countless bones lost their cohesion and rained down separately, Morgan remained motionless despite almost certainly being one of the targets. Her arms remained crossed such that they lifted her breasts and she did not even blink.

“That is the hero we have longed for.”

Only after whispering that did she flutter away.

“Now, allow me to introduce you to our castle. The time to repay you is at hand.”

Part 12

Followed by a white sea that swirled and rose up unnaturally in places, the cowboy hat Skeleton known as Skull Wave looked up at the writing on the arched entrance in shock.

“Boo Boo Land?”

It was hard to tell if that meant he was popular or not.

A small light fluttered over.

It was Alice, the palm-sized Fairy in a violet dress.

“It’s dangerous in here! We’re prepared for you, so turning around now would be the wise choice!! Grr, grr!!”

“Oh, it’s the little lady. How are your wings? They don’t hurt, do they? As long as the base is fine, you should be able to soothe them with ointment.”

“Mgh!”

“Have you made up with your sister yet? I know it’s embarrassing, but you should find a way sooner rather than later. As time passes, you might just miss the right timing. I’ve screwed that up more than enough times when fighting with my wife.”

“Mghh…!!”

“But thanks for the warning. I know it can’t be easy trapped between your village’s decision and your personal feelings. But sometimes a man can’t stop for fear of injury. Don’t worry about me. Bye.”

He looked away from the Fairy and continued on.

The front gate was a double door of logs tied together with vines, and it was shut. They seemed to have started a tower defense game.

After going through the motions of sighing, he lightly tapped the ground with the bottom of the axe he held.

Immediately, the air could be heard splitting. 30 or 40 identical axes flew from the white sea behind him. As the giant blades rotated through the air and landed inside the park, they may have been reminiscent of frisbees or UFOs.

Of course, no matter how many bones there were, only one Skeleton could stand up. He was only establishing supply points in case something unexpected occurred.

(The preparations are complete. …It’s time I got going too.)

By the time he held down the cowboy hat with a hand and thought that, it was all over.

An explosion burst out.

In just an instant, the log gate was blown to smithereens and splinters sprayed inwards like when a sake bottle was hit horizontally by a bullet.

This was hardly surprising since Skull Wave had 20 arms attached to his back and each one held an axe taller than he was. And since he was using psychokinesis to move, the different parts did not actually need to be attached. He could freely remake himself with no concern for trivial things like “joints”. Each axe weighed more than 30 kg and they were each released with enough force to reach 2400 rpm. It was a lot like combining 10 giant battering rams and firing them using a low-speed-rotation Gatling gun.

(Oh, that ain’t good. I’m using the real world’s filth to sum things up in this fantasy world. I guess I’m still more human than I thought.)

His arms of different lengths and thicknesses spread out behind him like a giant flower as he stepped through the unrecognizable remains of the gate. If their individual power was insufficient, they would get help from the terrain and structures. A makeshift log barricade zigzagged across the plaza in front of him. They had likely been planning to slow him down with the barricade while they used a dense hail of projectiles to wipe out the bones. They may have planned to directly attack using the movable barricades as shields.

That was the correct choice, but it would not help much when he could break right through the walls and fences.

He faced a round pond and a giant pig-faced monument. A pillar of water came from the top of the monument, so it was apparently meant to be a fountain. He was surrounded by a roller coaster mine cart track and he also saw a freefall tower and Ferris wheel further in the distance.

He easily destroyed the zigzagging barrier.

“Whoops.”

The bones approached either side of the plaza to avoid the fountain and they stopped once they reached the food stands. The yogurt-soaked skewers were still sitting out, but he decided to leave them be.

(I’m oddly hesitant to let that go to waste. Not that I can eat anything these

days.)

With the white sea behind him, Skull Wave heard the roaring of the wind.

Immediately thereafter, a 12-wheeled section of carts ignored the track and filled his vision.

“Wha-!?”

His human knowledge had worked against him here. He had assumed a roller coaster had to follow its track and that nothing else was even an option, so he was slow to react when the carts dynamically derailed.

(Tch!!)

But this was not a fatal blow for Skull Wave. As previously stated, his axes had the same force as a 10-battering-ram Gatling gun. No matter how many carts were sent his way, he could intercept them with a head-on rush and obliterate them in order like a never-ending pencil sharpener.

However, it did turn his full attention in that direction.

And that allowed something to target him from the side.

“Annnnd go!!”

A shrill voice called out from above as if timing something.

(A Fairy…?)

The Skeleton looked to the side while continuing to tear apart the flying roller coaster.

This time it was a swing ship.

The giant swing was modeled after a pirate ship, but its supports had been removed from the ground so its great mass could be sent his way.

“Gwooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

His bones were shattered in an instant. It was as refreshing a sight as a strike in bowling, but that was not going to end his life.

(Although *I technically don’t even have a life.*)

The skull wearing the cowboy hat flew in a parabolic arc, was caught by another bone arm, and was attached to a new neck.

That was all it took for Skull Wave to activate once more.

It was the same no matter how often it happened. The white sea was like hundreds if not thousands of plain jigsaw puzzles mixed together. With that many pieces to work with, he could be remade any number of times, so there was no end in sight.

…Or so he thought.

"…?"

At first the Skeleton was only confused.

"That's what you were after? Dammit!!"

Part 13

Armelina was in charge as she looked down across Boo Boo Land from the top of the freefall tower that stood several dozen meters tall.

She could freely wield Magic such as fire or ice, but as a Fighter Priest, she instead pursued physical maces and metal balls on chains. So she viewed the scene through the bubble-like film filling a rectangular frame made from necklace-thin chains. This displayed the results of all sorts of calculations: potential energy, kinetic energy, gravity, pendulum motion, combining and separating vectors, *etc.* The frame displayed curves of light to visualize the next movements of the roller coaster, swing ship, and other massive rides.

(Of course, this is only good for something slow enough to visualize. It won't help with Elkiad's bullets or Boo Boo when he goes all out.)

"Derail the water ride at 300% power, drop the freefall to crush the Skeleton, and then close inner gates 5, 6, and 7! Use the haunted house's glowing pollen holograms to divert Skull Wave's aim and send the coffee cup carrying Boo Boo

away to the other side! Keep the ride spinning to guide him toward the Ferris wheel!!”

As the palm-sized Fairies flitted around to obey her instructions, the rides flew along the curves shown in light on her frame and stabbed into the bone sea.

Of course, Skull Wave was a bone puzzle who could remake himself as many times as he needed to. A simple impact was not going to win this.

But Armelina and the others had something else planned.

Morgan sounded impressed as she floated by the Fighter Priest’s side.

“You’ve split them up quite well.”

“Yeah. No matter how far his white sea spreads, there’s only ever the one bone puzzle in the hat. So if we separate the cowboy hat from the surrounding white sea, the commands can’t reach them anymore. We can crush them with the roller coaster, create a wall with the remains of the swing ship, and shut them inside the inner gates. We might not be able to fill in the whole sea, but a puddle is a different matter.”

Skull Wave had thrown in several bone axes to create supply points in advance. That was somewhat frightening, but that was really all he could do. The individual bones could not get up on their own to create a great army.

“Now, then. I hope they’re doing their job down on the ground too.”

In this tower defense game, they had to protect Boo Boo…or rather, his Shining Weapon. Beatrice was his bodyguard in case Skull Wave got close and Filinion was their healer. Skull Wave had the power to break through walls and gates, so they could not stay in one place and had to continue running around the park to stay safe.

(You can break through the walls and gates, but you’re alone. The Fairies will prepare more and more new walls to divide you further and further until you can’t retrieve any of the bones you scattered around!)

But it proved very true that there was no safe place in the park.

“Oh, crap!”

Armelina noticed something and cried out just as a giant white axe spun

through the air and attacked the freefall tower. The cowboy hat owner had noticed her there and thrown it. When she saw more and more of the flying disks approaching, she jumped onto a cart she had waiting nearby. It had been designed for Boo Boo's size, but a human could apparently use it by attaching something like a child seat to the side. …The only problem was that it had never been tested before.

"I will now drop you as planned," announced Morgan as she flew nearby.

"I don't like the sound of that!!"

The Fairies had created this literal freefall ride from their misunderstanding of human entertainment. The only brakes were the metal staff Armelina held in both hands.

Metal teeth jutted out from the staff like a giant rake and sparks flew as they dug into the side of the tower.

(Oh, no! I can't slow down enough!)

"Boo!! Jump, Armelina!!"

"…"

Relying on the voice heard just before landing, Armelina twisted her wrist. The metal teeth were already digging deep into the tower side, but now they caught and were repelled like the needle skipping across an old record, sending the Fighter Priest out from the safety bar and into the air.

A chill ran through her spine and even her heart, but the expected heavy impact never came.

Boo Boo had extended his powerful arms and used his spring-like muscles to catch her while allowing the impact to escape.

She breathed a sigh of relief and scratched her cheek.

"You damn gentleman. This is my first time being princess carried, you know?"

"Wahhhh! You stole his first time!?"

Beatrice burst into tears nearby, but they did not have time for that. The white mass was approaching fast.

Part 14

“Now! Launch the trampoline cannon!!”

“Time for the rotating wooden horse attack. Gooo!!”

Shrill cheers sounded as plant vines or animal tendons were released with enough tension to throw a large boulder. Each time, a massive ride was released and the cowboy hat monster was shattered and scattered.

“Ah, ahhh, ahhhhh…”

But one Fairy in particular could not wholeheartedly rejoice at the sight: Alice. She knew that Skeleton too well. Exchanging words and emotions meant too much.

The Skeleton was destroyed over and over, but each time, the scattered bones would gather together and he would stand back up. That bizarre monster would not let anyone worry about him. His white sea had been separated out by ride wreckage and inner gates, so it was more like a small pond now.

What would happen once it was gone?

What if the cowboy hat was stolen? What if the large red jewel in it was broken?

“…”

Alice could not just watch. She fluttered down in her violet dress to meet Skull Wave who was putting himself back together for the umpteenth time.

“Oh, it’s the little lady. What brings you here to see your enemy?”

“A-are you stupid!? You should have run away and recovered your numbers before you ended up like this!”

“Maybe so.” The Skeleton put his cowboy hat back on. “But there are some things in this world you can’t put off until later. Some people charge into the Labyrinth to save a cornered rookie and end up getting themselves killed. When you hear about that later on, you might come up with some clever ideas like

throwing rocks from a distance to distract the powerful enemy or calculating out the shortest route to the stairs in advance so you can escape right away. But I'm not going to pretend I'm smarter than them. They probably couldn't think straight in the moment. They saw the rookie covered in sweat and trapped at a dead end, and they couldn't put it off until later, even if that meant ignoring their own safety. So their choice was a noble one, even if that didn't play out in the results."

“You…”

“People have always asked me these things. Why did I decide to build the inn town? Why did I defeat the enraged mother dragon and then heal her wounds? My answer was always the same: I hate not being able to sleep at night and I don’t want dreams of anyone – human or not – getting hurt and bleeding. Everyone tilted their heads and read way too much into it, though.”

“…”

The Skeleton had repeatedly called her “little lady”.

That was not him looking down on her. He understood the customs of the Fairies. They disliked having a stranger suddenly address them by name. So while judging their distance from someone, they would use roundabout ways of addressing someone, such as “Moonlit Neighbor” or “Old Guest”, but not many people knew of and followed that custom these days.

He looked wild and careless.

But at his core, he had a considerate and respectful heart.

So nothing he said was thoughtless.

“They’re cornered too. They just can’t see the coming dead-end because they don’t have enough light. I can’t let people with such honest eyes meet the Sage. That will only bring misfortune to everyone involved.”

Was that really Skull Wave’s entire motivation? He gained nothing and he had no grudge against them. If it would prevent an acquaintance from walking down a dangerous path, he would gladly play the villain. That was all this was.

One look at that Skeleton made it clear the Sage was no normal person. They had a devilish intellect that could twist the definition of life and death. Just how could that knowledge be misused if they were angered? It was not fun to imagine.

But when he saw the look of intense fear and slight disgust on Alice’s face, Skull Wave’s shoulders relaxed slightly. If he had eyelids, he may have narrowed his eyes a little.

“Unfortunately, *I don’t mean it like that*.”

“?”

“Then again, I’d prefer it if only I knew what I meant. Now, get back to your post, little lady. Don’t be getting to know your enemy. Do you want to be banished from your village?”

The Skeleton casually flicked the palm-sized Fairy with his bony finger.

Alice was knocked aside, but before she could even cry out in protest, a small train crashed into the Skeleton, breaking him to pieces.

“…!?”

Alice grew pale and wordlessly flapped her mouth, but Skull Wave used his one remaining arm to place the cowboy hat back on his skull and bowed.

Then he and the other bones were tossed into the danger zone of another ride.

Vines were stretched out in a V-shape and forcibly held to the ground.

“A reverse bungee? Interesting!!”

With a deafening noise, the scattered bones were launched several dozen meters into the air. Some of the flying bones connected into a full Skull Wave who then flipped around to regain his balance. After searching for some handy footing, he landed on top of the roller coaster mine cart track that rose up like a mountain.

And someone was already there: Boo Boo, last of the Iberian Orcs.

He had a 4 meter frame and held out his Shining Weapon that could be mistaken for a log or steel beam, but the narrow mine cart track was apparently not an impediment to his movement. Meanwhile, Skull Wave had been knocked around the park like a pinball before arriving at this highest point. The white sea was nowhere to be seen. He only had a single body’s worth of bones, one large axe, and the cowboy hat on his head.

“I can’t give you this Shining Weapon. This has nothing to do with the Sage. It contains something important to me.”

“Even if holding onto that important thing will cause you to lose your smile?”

“It’s true I would be sad if I lost Beatrice. And I don’t want to see Filinion,

Armelina, or any of the others hurt either.”

He was not shaken.

Before, he had been saddened that he could only run away and act as a diversion to help his friends, but he was not at all shaken now.

“But they told me not to worry or hold back. They asked if I was trying to insult their feelings. So I won’t fear getting them involved. No, I’ve decided I’ll continue on to the future with them. I won’t resign myself to being hated. I won’t run away from making friends or from the work needed to build a connection with someone else!!”

“Oh? Now you’re looking kind of manly, Boo Boo. Finding something you aren’t willing to compromise on is a good thing.”

That monster was only bones, but he was undoubtedly smiling.

Skull Wave had to be weakened. He had lost the white sea behind him and he no longer had the many arms and axes to expand himself. With only the one weapon, he could not unleash the ferocious Gatling gun attack with giant blunt weapons. With just the normal body and the one axe, he would lose to Boo Boo.

But that man pulled the hat over his eyes, held it down with a hand, and did not take a single step back.

“But that’s exactly why I don’t want to invite you to your deaths. Can’t you just grant me my selfishness here!?”

With those words, a splendid pillar of fire erupted. It came from Skull Wave and his axe. The weapon of bone and the Skeleton of the same substance were used as kindling to create the dreadful hellfire surrounding him.

“This shouldn’t be surprising. The phosphorus in human bones will burn. I think there was a time when this was said to be the source of the Hitodama myths. The less credible theories suggested things like plasma and methane gas, though.”

And phosphorus was incredibly toxic. The white phosphorus used in the Hitodama theory and in rat poison was lethal at only 50mL. Of course, it would not reach that level just by burning some bones, but Skull Wave was not just any

bones. He had the ability to control them and turn them into a great power.

Incredible heat and toxic smoke.

If physical blows were not enough, he would add more to his attacks until the many forms of suffering finally defeated his powerful foe.

“Neither of us wants to stretch this out needlessly.”

Inside the flames, the man raised the giant axe.

“So let’s settle this already, lady killer!!”

Part 15

Any battle had a single conclusion.

There was no other way to describe that final clash.

Part 16

It was a spectacular sight.

Brutal flames and poisonous smoke. But the Iberian Orc used no trickery. Just like using the pressure of a punch to blow out a candle’s flame, his giant Shining Weapon swept everything away.

But there was just one person who turned her back on the joy of this victory.

Alice left Boo Boo Land and fluttered around the forest. Those palm-sized Fairies were at the bottom of the food chain, so that kind of noticeable movement could easily gather the attention of various predators. But in her violet dress, Alice never stopped her search despite the danger.

“I’m pretty sure it was over here…”

That lonely monster had been worried for everyone more than anyone else, but no one had realized his true reasons.

But she would not let him remain lonely. Fairies always repaid their debts. The entire village had sided with Boo Boo and he had saved Alice’s sister as well as Alice herself, but she could not look down on her other savior.

“I know he flew off in this direction!!”

At the end of her risky search, four-winged Alice finally found him.

“Man, now that was a flight. A completely unasked for one, though. Boo Boo really knows how to make a grand slam.”

With his weapon and body lost, he was no more than a skull wearing a cowboy hat. He sat on the black soil below the trees.

“But what brings you here, little lady? Why would you want to visit a hated loser like me?”

“Uh…uuh…”

She bit her small lip, but it was no use. She could not suppress the sobs.

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh! Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh!!”

“C’mon, stop that. Don’t cry. You need to stop! There was no villain there. That was only two men pitting their conflicting choices against each other. Okay? There are three things I truly can’t stand: styrofoam, dentistry tools, and crying kids. So please. I beg you. I can’t escape as just a head!!”

“But…then…you’ll be…”

“There’s no helping that. I’d kind of already realized it, but a ghost clinging to the past and the living walking toward the future just aren’t going to get along. I’m sure they’ll continue on even if they know how incredibly dangerous it is.”

Nevertheless, Skull Wave had tried to take away Boo Boo’s Shining Weapon and rob them of their path to the Sage. ...It truly was selfishness on his part. When he ran across a rookie trapped between a Labyrinth dead-end and a powerful enemy, he would draw his sword and rush in despite there being more

rational things he could do. That was a foolish but noble human emotion.

He was a Skeleton given life by the Sage's Stone.

He was Skull Wave, the white ocean that had transcended life and death.

But he too had been born a human.

"This isn't going to be easy…"

As only a skull and a cowboy hat, that man looked up into the blue sky as he spoke. But instead of to Alice in front of him, he seemed to be speaking to someone far in the distance.

"You've decided to keep walking on your own two feet. So prepare yourself and make sure you protect it all to the end, Boo Boo."

Long-Lived Royal Elf Sibyl's Live News☆

The Site of a Strange Ritual? The Mystery of Boo Boo Land!!

Hi! Today, I think I'll approach these mysterious ruins that suddenly appeared deep in the forest.

I asked the Harpies and Thousand Dragon who live in the area, and they said this area was originally empty forest. They have no idea when such a large facility was built or how it suddenly turned to ruins.

Who made it, what for, and how did it end up so run down?

With that introduction over, let's set foot inside. Gulp.

After walking through the collapsed arch, I've found a mysterious spring. There's a half-crumbled pig-faced statue sinking into it? I see the wreckage of a contraption that looks a lot like the cart tracks seen in mines. This is really making me nervous. Was there some kind of major accident here? It looks like there's even more further in, but the inner gate is shut. I think I'll make a real

effort and climb over it. Kh, it’s times like this when I really hate being only about 150 cm tall!

Okay, I’m at the top…wah!?

There are b-b-b-b-b-b-bones! Right over the wall is an unbelievable number of bones! Uh, um, umm, just counting the skulls…ahh, it’s too many to count!? H-how many people died here!?

What in the world happened here? Was Boo Boo Land the site of rituals held for some dreadful evil god? Ah, ahhh!? And more importantly, will I be able to get out of here aliiii

Chapter 2: Fieldwork Hunting!

Part 1

“What a pain…” sighed a tall and slender woman wearing outdoor glasses, a sports hoodie, and shorts while jogging.

She took a short break to stretch her limbs, twist her hips around, arch her back, and otherwise limber up her body while checking her smartphone.

“Keep fighting until I get more than 10 ‘sures’! Special Move☆Sideways Peace Sign!! …No, that isn’t quite right. Should I wink and stick my tongue out a bit?”

She practiced her Nanskagram selfie pose only when there were no other pedestrians around, but after a bit of that, she switched her focus and her smartphone’s screen to her Ground’s Nir battle records.

They had settled their battle against Skull Wave, an artificial mutation of an undead Skeleton, but she could not exactly say she was satisfied with the results.

She would not stand a chance against Boo Boo either, but she did not enjoy this reminder that she could lose a battle of pure physical attacks. And at times like this, that beautiful woman with her long black hair tied back did not rely on awakening a convenient talent inside her or on the legends of some ultimate magic hidden deep within a cave. The Percentage-type Magic provided by their equipment added a % to their physical abilities. A gauntlet of STRx200% would help a heavyweight boxer much more than it would a book girl. Things might be different when it came to INT, but it all came down to good old-fashioned hard work. One’s daily studies and workouts would mean a lot to their Parameters.

She switched her smartphone to music mode, stuck it in the holder on her upper arm, and resumed running through early morning Tokyo. The lithe legs

extending down form her shorts displayed the energy of a carnivorous feline.

Lately, she had left the runners making a large loop around Tokyo Station and the National Theatre. Instead, she ran to the fish market on the bay coast. She could not find breakfast anywhere near as good anywhere else. Since she was trying to build strength instead of go on a diet, she did not have to view sugar and carbs as her enemy. In her mind, there was no substitute for a cheap seafood bowl with plenty of sea urchin, roe, and salmon on it.

(I really can't keep up this kind of habit without some kind of reward at the end.)

Mixed in with the middle-aged men whose hair and skin had been punished by the direct sunlight and sea breeze, she scarfed down the contents of the Styrofoam bowl in her shorts that showed off her legs all the way up to the base of her thighs.

She had thought every channel only aired the news or an infomercial at this early hour, but the cable broadcast was apparently an exception. The restaurant's TV was showing a police drama rerun.

"Detective, reload already! If you don't hurry up, the next one will get here!!"

"Shut up, Mystery Freak! I'm going to be disciplined yet again thanks to you!!"

(Ahh, I'm so jealous. I wish I could ride a motorcycle around the harbor at night while firing a shotgun like crazy… Oh, I know. I should ask Inoue if there are any dangerous cases I could work on.)

"Thanks for the meal."

"Sure thing! It's great having a beauty stopping by every day. Sales-wise, I mean."

"?"

Unsure what he meant, the black-haired woman began her return trip. Some old men were already casting fishing poles into the bay. They had likely already competed for the seafood they needed at the market.

"Catch anything?"

"Only a boot and a can. They say Tokyo Bay's gotten a lot cleaner, but there's

still a ways to go.”

She smiled bitterly and left the fish market. Once back inside the squalid urban area, she hit the rush hour crowds. She always used this road, so a group in red elementary school backpacks called out to her.

“Oh, it’s the runner lady!”

“You still wear shorts as an adult?”

She waved and continued on.

(It’s probably about time to change my course. It probably isn’t a good idea to have too many people remember me.)

As she thought that, her smartphone rang. It was a voice call. The timing was perfect, so she came to a stop and felt the sweat and heat she had nearly forgotten about while running. She mainly wore the hoodie due to her complex about her breast size, but she had no choice now. She unzipped it, bent back a little to remove it, fanned her neck and chest with one hand, and operated her smartphone with the other. An old man out walking his dog was so entranced by the sight that he tripped and fell face-first into a pile of trash bags, so she gave him a curious look as she began her conversation.

“Hello. This is Sakurai.”

“Hello, hello. It’s Inoue. Do you really need to use your fake name when talking with me? Good morning, chief. There’s already been a change of plans.”

“They’ve already made their move? I only just circled around the administrative office and swapped out the battery.”

“That isn’t what I meant, so let’s bring an end to the national bank case according to schedule. I was referring to your sparring partner! Go to the gym now and you’ll find everyone’s left. You broke their spirits after all the beatings you’ve given them!! When a guy is more than twice your weight and still loses that badly, it’s shameful enough for him to want to commit seppuku, so please show some restraint!!”

The beauty in a tank top and shorts shook her head at his shouting. Even if she had left out of necessity, she still missed the different dojos and the shooting

range at Sakuradamon.

It was so easy to grow rusty.

But it was difficult to continue honing her skill with only civilian facilities to work with.

“Inoue, find a replacement before I arrive. Make sure they’re at least at frontline combat level. I’m not interested in someone with one of those black belts that are only for show or who’s only used a sword in a sports setting.”

“Ehh? But it’s not even 8 in the morning. It’s unreasonable to call someone up so early.”

“Is that so, unreasonable boy? Either find someone, or it’s your butt in the ring. I don’t care which it is.”

“Ehhhh

birthday suit. A shelf contained a brand new type of body oil and some other bath goods that she had stockpiled here.

(I-I'm definitely not taking a lesson from Filinion here. I'm definitely not thinking body oil will increase my feminine charm!! It's meant to soothe my heart from my days of hard work! I've never once wondered if it might help my boobs grow!!)

She had considered trying some when she had the time, but she was surprised to find the seal broken on a few of them. The seals had been lazily torn off with bits and pieces remaining. As she trembled in the nude, she grabbed her smartphone, stood tall, and called a certain number with enough intensity that crimson light would have shot from her eyes in Ground's Nir.

"Inoueeeeeee!!!!!"

"Yes!? S-sorry, chief, but if I'm going to die as your sparring partner, at least give me some time to sign up for a high-payout life insurance policy to support my parents…"

"This isn't about that!! I recognize this lazy seal removal. You've been using my body oil, haven't you!? Along with the washing sponge for sensitive skin!! These are for women, you know!?"

"Oh, the Capricious Bear one? I didn't know who bought that. So it was you?"

"Make no mistake! It just happens to suit my skin and it's only a coincidence it's modeled after that mascot. Besides, how did you accidentally use them when I left them in the women's shower room!?"

"Um… That gym only has the one shower room. It isn't a diet gym for young wives, so it's not like anyone's going to peep…"

"You come with me to Ground's Nir for a minute. We can continue this chat after I drop a Shooting Star on your head."

"No, thank you. That technique makes the ground sink down over an area the size of a school campus! And in Ground's Nir, I'm Huldra the cute Alchemist Cheerleader. I spent a lot of care making minute adjustments to that cute girl face, so I'm not going to let you crush it underfoot like an empty can!"

“Why is a guy like you a popular girl with a nicer body than me!?”

She shouted in anger and hung up. She really wanted to hit him now, but that major technique barely ever hit in an actual battle and it would be impossible to target Inoue while he ran around. She actually liked aloe oil the best, but she had no interest in using it now that a guy had touched it. Capricious Bear had done nothing wrong, but she could only see it as a sponge covered in filth and curly hair. She tearfully puffed out her cheeks and carried only the unopened bottles into one of the shower booths. She grimaced when she saw the large mirror in front of her.

(Dammit, I really want to get contacts. But I’m afraid of the unexpected happening, so only glasses will do. Why can’t they invent lenses that won’t fall out in a light struggle or from the recoil of a gun?)

The boiler had issues, so there was a trick to using the gym shower. The temperature knob had only a few millimeters between ice cold and scorching hot.

“…”

She stared at her breasts in the large mirror. She held her hands up and hesitated over whether or not to touch them and massage them, but she managed to shake herself free of a superstition as common as the one saying milk would make them grow.

“…I guess something that simple won’t make them any bigger.”

She let the warm water wash over her naked body as she pressed her forehead against the mirror. She focused on the sensation of the hot liquid washing from the top of her head, down her neck, past her chest (which refused to give her any confidence), along her navel, and to her thighs. She belonged to a secret division that handled unofficial investigations that the normal police and even the JSDF could not handle. She was the chief of what was officially a private detective agency full of retired police offers and JSDF officers. That phantom unit was not known even to their allied nations and its leader muttered something like a curse while all alone in the shower booth and completely forget to try out any of the new products.

“Keep fighting until I get more than 10 ‘sures’! Special Move☆Upturned

Gaze!!”

……

……

“Argh. I need Capricious Bear to comfort me…”

Part 2

After using his prized nose to sniff out some Jewel Truffles and Tree Hollow Honey, Boo Boo happily returned home and found his house had been given an upgrade.

His house had always been simply made because it could be destroyed at any time (by the dynamic way he tossed and turned in his sleep), but the leaf house had transformed into a log cabin.

“Boo?”

The house’s owner tilted his head, so the usual meddling Fairies must have worked a little too hard this time. Armelina read the note left by Expert Construction Worker Meridiana.

“What’s this? Your house has glass windows now and a door that locks!”

There was a small Fairy door just below the roof, so it really did seem to be their work.

Filinion dangled down from the lever-type knob positioned quite high up, opened and closed the thick door, and peered inside.

“Hoehh. It’s pretty spacious inside. The floor space can’t be that much different, but the leaf house was a triangular tent. Just making the walls vertical has really increased the total volume.”

The inside was more like a mountain cabin than a normal house or villa. It was a single large space with no interior walls. There was a fireplace by the wall and a

set of giant blankets stuffed with Ghost Down folded up at one end.

However, the end of Beatrice's ahoge began to burn.

"Why isn't there a bath?"

The Fairies apparently had no intention of interfering with Boo Boo's lifestyle. He would continue to draw water from the river, cook the animals and fish he caught outside, and refuse to bathe in water warmer than his own skin.

(But, but. Surely I'm not being overbearing if I just want to rid him of that smell so I won't choke when I hug him. Sigh, isn't there anything I can do?)

That was when a girl of about 10 approached. She was actually the Fairy Queen and one of the Break News. She had long, silver hair and a small body. She wore a ribbon dress that only consisted of black ribbons except for the miniskirt, and a large flower decoration.

"Oh, oh. Boo Boo. How do you like the new home my underlings prepared for you?"

She may have made a sudden visit to ask his thoughts in place of Meridiana who was too shy to appear before them. Despite looking like arrogance incarnate, she could be quite considerate for a paradox with a soul.

"Boo. Can I really accept something like this?"

"If you don't, it'll just be a mysterious empty house. Then I'd lose my nap spot and that perverted carrot would be lonely if your field fell into ruin."

They heard an odd concerned cry from out in the fenced-off field.

"Staying here will help everyone. When good fortune falls from the sky, it's best to accept it instead of fearing it."

Filinion and Armelina just about had their souls taken away by the heartwarming talk, but Beatrice remained wary with the look of a hawk eyeing its prey.

"Then I'll have to repay all of you," said Boo Boo.

"C'mon, now. My underlings are doing this to repay you. You'll get us stuck in an infinite loop."

“Boo. That’s fine. If we both repay each other, we’ll both be happy!”

“Hah hah! Then I’ll take you up on your offer. Oh, I know. I feel like eating an egg dish. And a rare one at that.”

In an instant, the red Holy Swordswoman’s eyes widened and she shouted a word she did not often use.

“Eureka!!!!!”

Part 3

Everything was white.

They were in northern Ground’s Nir. It was a small island that would only take around 3 days for a human to walk around, but due to the great difference in height, the north was known for being covered in snow year-round. The translucent water spirits known as Undines were happily dancing in a circle here, so it was an utterly icy land.

Beatrice tried to disguise her hawk-eyed look with a cutesy voice as she clasped her hands behind her back, approached from the side, and introduced the snowy area to Boo Boo.

“O-okay, we’re almost there, Boo Boo. You have to repay, Sutriona, right? And you need a rare egg dish to do it. Well, the north is well-known for its Hot Spring Ice Cream which can only be described as ‘Rare☆’.”

With a smile on her face, that bird of prey added more in her heart.

“This is my chance!! I can use this unusual food to lure Boo Boo to a hot spring. I have such a devilish mind. And he’d suspect the hot springs nearby, so I went for the northern Hot Spring Ice Cream instead of the Hot Spring Egg! It’s all so perfect that I’m scaring myself!!”

“It’s all coming out of your mouth, Beatrice. And you aren’t hiding those hawk eyes.”

Hearing Armelina's exasperated comment, the Holy Swordswoman quickly covered her mouth and gave her friends a suspicious look.

"Filinion, Armelina, why are you two with us? Show some tact!"

"I'm worried about you and your hawk eyes."

"I'm here to check on some interesting rumors I've heard related to Mixing. But…uuh…it's way too cold!! Without your warmth, Beatrice, I'll start freezing from the end of my hair!!"

"You moron, this is no time for girls to be sticking together for warmth! Can you please read the atmosphere!?"

Unable to resist her survival instincts, the glasses girl abandoned her femininity and began embracing her, so the Holy Swordswoman stopped the zombie cow with a (gauntleted) fist.

Meanwhile, Boo Boo trudged along through the white landscape like a snowplow.

"Are you cold too, Armelina?"

"Hm? Well, yeah. I do have some Water Resistance, but I'm not an expert like that Ice Waterfall Princess. Still, I have Magic to thank for letting me attack a snowy mountain with so little equipment."

"Then you can stay close to me. I'm warm, so you'll be warm too!"

"Oh dear," said the Fighter Priest as Boo Boo placed his large hand over her head. He pulled her over to his hips like he was roughly rubbing her head.

She was essentially clinging to his side as she looked up at him.

"Cough. You do have a powerful smell… But, Boo Boo, you really are a gentleman."

"Boo. Again, what's a gentleman?"

Boo Boo tilted his head while continuing to roughly rub her head.

"…Armelina?"

"Gyahee! Y-you're gonna burn me, Beatrice! You're really gonna cook me medium rare!"

The unfortunate person who was caught in the middle writhed around on the snow (with certain parts of her jiggling), but she was a recovery potion expert. She would probably be fine.

But as the White Witch rolled around, she suddenly disappeared with the sound of something passing by. A biting wind blew through and the snow around their feet was blown into the air, forming a pure white screen in every direction.

“Wah! What!? A whiteout!?”

“Boo! No one move! Stay still and wait for it to pass!”

“What happened to Filinion!? She wears white, so it’s hard to tell where she is!”

“The glasses cow is a healing expert, so she’ll probably be fine even if she’s frozen solid!”

That sounded cruel, but talk in the bathroom or break room was always somewhat harsh. It was like a rose’s thorns.

As she walked, Beatrice had fired torch-like illumination Magic onto the snow at even intervals and drew lines between the light sources to secure their way back. But with their vision blotted out with the white, the light could not reach and the lines were erased. They had to be careful.

It probably only lasted a few minutes.

When the pure white screen cleared away, the entire landscape had changed. First of all, the rise and fall of the land was different. They saw hills and a valley that had not been there before. They also saw the occasional roof or stone chimney.

Snowmen were hopping around, but they were probably Snow Golems which had Gimmick gears embedded inside them. There were also Wild Snow Rabbits which seemed to have been intentionally released here. They all kept people away from the valley.

“I guess these ruins buried in the snow appear or disappear during the blizzards and avalanches…”

“Hold on. That means this is even worse than a desert mirage. If even the

landmarks change, we'll completely lose our bearings."

Well-camouflaged White Witch Filinion was lying at the bottom of the valley. However she had fallen, she tearfully had her butt sticking into the air like she had just been hit by a German suplex. Her shorts were pulled as tight as possible, so the base of her thighs looked even plumper than usual.

"Heeee. H-help me…"

"She's trying to seduce some help, so why not just leave her?"

"Yeah. …I'd rather die than decide I'm lacking that."

The girls immediately made up their mind, but Boo Boo was a boy. He walked down the steep slope on his own. The drop of a few meters was only a small step for his giant body.

"Pant, pant. Gasp, gasp. Th-thank you."

"Boo. I'm happy that you weren't hurt."

"Heh heh heh. Um, more importantly…"

Filinion took Boo Boo's hand and looked around the ruins surrounding them. Most of it was still buried in white snow and ice, but the parts sticking out of the snow walls was enough to figure out what it was.

"This is a foot-powered lathe. This was used to carve metal…no, animal horns and teeth… The brick dome is for…well, there are tongs and a plaster container nearby…so melting down metal I guess…"

"?"

"Yes, is this the Amalgam counterfeit factory?"

Beatrice's eyebrows twitched as she looked down from overhead. Armelina was too perfect and showed an unnatural lack of reaction.

Boo Boo alone tilted his head.

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, sorry. Amalgam is a Guild made by humans. You know what a Guild is, right? It's a large group working toward accumulating lots of Experience Points, learning Magic, and securing the Pieces that will bring about technological

revolution. But they never entered the Labyrinth.” Filinion lowered her voice a little. “They specialized in the gears used as currency in the inn town. They would sell cheap counterfeits of rare Mixing ingredients like Unicorn Horns or Mermaid Scales and they would counterfeit the order forms and shop deeds to acquire the real deal. The people who had their recovery potions and ingredients taken apparently had a lot of trouble in the Labyrinth. Their name, Amalgam, comes from a deceptive success from the ancient days of alchemy. That means they intended to commit these crimes from the outset.”

This had been their base of operations. Their counterfeit factory.

Had Filinion gone out of her way to visit here because she had failed to see through their tricks as a Mixing type? Or had she thought she could use their negative techniques for good?

“But since the rumors about Amalgam’s counterfeit factory being here were true, and it’s even buried under the cold snow and ice…”

Beatrice completed that thought for her with her hands on her slender hips.

“Then the ending of the rumors might also be true. …The ending where Amalgam went too far, earned the Sage’s wrath, and was purged in a single night.”

Part 4

Purged.

That was not a pleasant word for anyone. And it weighed especially heavy on Boo Boo’s life. The recent Skull Wave incident suggested that the Sage had been involved in the attack on the Iberian Orc village. And now they found Amalgam’s base buried in snow and ice. They had likely been guilty of their crimes, but that was not what mattered to Beatrice and the others.

The Sage was not just a relic of the past.

Even now, they were continuing to wield their “justice” to take lives.

“More importantly, look. We’ve reached the hot springs, Boo Boo. And since we’re here, it would be a shame not to take a dip! C’mon, c’mon. I have some Large Deceptive Silkworm towels and cooking oil soap!!”

“S-squeal!? I won’t let you trick me! I’m here to become the world’s greatest master of Hot Spring Ice Cream for Sutriona and the Fairies!!”

“And this is a hot spring, Boo Boo.”

“You aren’t making any sense! Boo… Then let’s settle this with sumo wrestling. I’ve heard of that human game. I’m not moving another step.”

“…Whisper. (Internal)”

“Beatrice, why the deadly serious look in your eyes!?”

The Holy Swordswoman grew flame wings from her back and charged forward like a rocket, but even she had trouble against that mass of muscle. It was truly a back and forth battle.

They were at a hot oasis (i.e. hot spring) in the snowy plain. A small pond of hot water melted the snow and some fruit trees grew around it thanks to its heat. It was a tiny paradise. The snowy north was apparently dotted with these hot oases.

Armelina watched the two of them push and pull while she hung a leather bag full of Bitesize Duck Eggs from the edge of the hot spring. Hot Spring Ice Cream was made by soft-boiling eggs in the hot spring, mixing them in a bowl with Wild Cow milk, Tree Hollow Honey, and Super Sweet Leaf herbs, sprinkling salt on the mixture, sticking the bowl in the snow to lower the temperature, and mixing it further to trigger the transformation. Ground’s Nir’s Fairies could apparently make their own popsicles by simply freezing fruit juice, but they had not reached the level of soft ice cream. This midway point was a lot like an ice cream cup and was sure to be highly valued by them.

Filinion crouched down and held out her hands for warmth as the steam fogged up her glasses.

“Won’t the Hot Spring Ice Cream have melted by the time we get back?”

“You’re a Mixing type, aren’t you? Bitesize Duck Egg shells are decent insulators, so if we stick the completed product inside here and you fix the cracks, it’ll last for a day or two just fine.”

No one said anything more about Amalgam’s fate. They forced themselves to enjoy this in order to clear away the malice that seemed to be pressing down on them like a dark cloud.

But even if they said nothing, they may have all understood that they could not so easily rid themselves of the Sage’s great shadow.

They heard a metallic ringing that sounded out of place in this blizzard hot spring. It placed a tiny crack in the harmonious atmosphere and it all fell apart from there. Or perhaps the pure sound of the bell returned the world to its proper state.

They saw a slender girl with her lemon-yellow hair worn in a splendidly curled ponytail.

Her clothes look a lot like a black sleeved leotard with silver armor added to the chest and waist. A *hagoromo*-like decorative cloth fluttered from her hands and around her back. She wore a tiny gold crown on her head. The bell sound had likely come from the crown. Her upper body was soft and slender like a gymnast or dancer, but her lower body was covered with knee-high steel boots that shined a dull silver.

Then there was her weapon. It looked something like a large scythe taller than she was, but the blade was a giant disk 70cm across instead of a crescent moon shape. That made the weapon look like the number 9. Beatrice was skeptical, but she soon found a few symbols in a chain reaction, much like figuring out a piece of trick artwork. The long handle had lumps in places and was actually made from multiple clubs attached end to end. The small cloth wrapped around it as a grip was actually a ribbon. The decorative crystal ball and long string on the back of the scythe were actually a ball and rope. And the yellow disk was a hoop. Altogether, it pointed to a single motif.

(The 5 categories of rhythmic gymnastics. I don’t know how she uses them to attack, but I doubt she just swings that around. It’s called a Shining Weapon because it controls your Magic.)

From the bottom of the long handle to the top of the giant disk blade, it was more than 2 meters long. One wrong move and that strange weapon could chop off its own user's fingers. That naturally told Beatrice something about its user.

She did not even need to look at the curves running from the ribs to hips showing through the leotard. The girl's lithe body was readily visible. If that soft body was unleashed, just what kind of ever-changing movements could she use to attack?

(Based on the STR and VIT support from her equipment, she probably uses footwork to dodge instead of defending. She must rarely come to a stop, so once we let her get going, we'll have to deal with an unending rush.)

"A Noble Dancer. Your name is Rusalka, isn't it? You're known for your incredible power with the Wind Element and I'm often compared to you. Your home is in Kobe, I believe."

"Those details are unnecessary. You only need to know that the Information Broker has officially sent me here to take your life."

Beatrice clicked her tongue and forcefully drew her Shining Weapon rapier. Filinion and Armelina also prepared for battle.

An attack for political reasons, now of all times? She had no real proof, but the Holy Swordswoman could not help but think of a certain title who had a connection to the Ministry of Defense.

(Could the Sage be behind this? They've already made their next move!?)

She had never directly fought this Noble Dancer, but she had heard the girl was as big a winner as the Ice Waterfall Princess who was known as queen of the battle arena. As previously stated, she specialized in wind. Just as Beatrice specialized in fire, she had pursued wind to the point that her skill could not be underestimated.

Beatrice's group could not sit around planning out their fight now that Rusalka had approached so close so suddenly. As the seconds passed painfully slowly, Beatrice desperately tried to figure out what their enemy would do.

(How's she going to attack? A simple gust of wind? A vacuum blade? Or is she going to fire needles or stones with compressed air? And will it be a precision

attack meant to pierce a single point or a scattershot meant to cover an entire surface?)

Sword and scythe. She mentally predicted the lines along which the blades and Magic would pass. If she misread even one of the virtual strings between the enemy and her allies, one of their heads would fly off like they had been hit by a snapping wire. The Holy Swordswoman was surrounded by a dreadful pressure and an odd sense of oneness.

(Or is she more fundamentally going to directly control the air pressure or oxygen density?)

Just then, a sudden voice cut through the compressed time.

“Boo?”

“Wait! Take this seriously, Boo Boo! It’s all over if we misread the very first move!!”

Beatrice could not look away as she yelled at him, but she could tell Boo Boo had not drawn his giant Shining Weapon. He held a hand to his mouth and tilted his head before saying more.

“But, Beatrice, she isn’t moving at all. The snow is starting to pile up on her.”

“Hm?”

The Holy Swordswoman finally started questioning this and Filinion pushed at her glasses with her left hand while producing a rectangular frame from mist. She viewed the readings displayed there.

“Um, based on her Parameter-type equipment…she’s focused so much on Wind Resistance that she has nothing to fight the cold. In other words, she hiked up into this freezing mountain in nothing but a gymnastics leotard and turned herself into a chilled dish. Simply put, she really is an idi-…”

“W-w-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

Part 5

“U-uuh…”

Rusalka, the slender girl with a curly lemon-yellow ponytail, released a groan from her small lips. She could not remember what had happened. She remembered receiving a secret mission from the Information Broker and contacting her target, but what was this warmth?

“Wah.”

She belatedly realized she was inside one of the hot oases that dotted the snowy plain.

And if she was in a hot spring…

“Wah, wah!?”

She was nude save for a bath towel. Her slender body was soaking up to above the chest in the cloudy water, but the gentle curve of the top of her breasts and her narrow collarbones were exposed. She also found herself more shocked than she had expected to find her clothing missing without her having removed it. Her 9-shaped circular scythe of a Shining Weapon was still there, but any girl would have to question having to defend herself while nude but armed.

On top of it all, a 4-meter pig-faced mass of bestial odor was soaking in the hot spring with her.

“Boo. Beatrice, it looks like she’s thawed out.”

“Ugyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!? A-a-a-a beeee

“Ah, ahhh!? Wait, why didn’t you put a towel around my hair!? Is this hot spring acidic or alkaline!? Either way, my cuticlllllllles!!”

Filinion had removed her kneesocks to soak her feet and she tossed a towel over with an exasperated look. Slender Rusalka raised her arms to catch it.

But then something fell straight down: the towel wrapped around her body.

“H-h-hee… Waaahhhn!?”

“Oh, honestly. We can tell your face is covered in tears and snot, so slow down and deal with this one thing at a time.”

When Armelina gave that advice while pulling up the leather bag full of the soft-boiled eggs for the Hot Spring Ice Cream, the flushed girl sniffled and wrapped the towels around her body and hair.

“And without Boo Boo supporting you, you would’ve drowned before coming to.”

“Besides, our clothes are just Magic taking that form. Yours disappeared because you forgot to set them up properly. Does that mean you end up naked every time you sleep? Even in the Labyrinth? I suppose they automatically return while you rub your sleepy eyes, so you never noticed.”

This time, the Noble Dancer’s face went entirely pale. It was the same look as someone realizing their skirt had been caught on the back of their waist, showing off their butt the entire way to school.

Meanwhile, Beatrice wore a towel while she sat next to Boo Boo and she could not care less about Rusalka or the towel on her head.

“Eh heh heh. Boo Boo, I knew you would never abandon someone in need. And now’s my chance to wash you! God is on my side!!”

“Squeal. You need to be quiet in front of a sick person. Bad Beatrice.”

“If you’re going to wash his body, then get him out of the bath! It’s times like this that I remember you’re a sheltered girl with some odd gaps in your knowledge of etiquette!!”

This was different from the personal jacuzzi she usually used or the disposable hot spring dug out of the dirt next to the river, but Beatrice did not seem to

understand that. This was one downside of her life of confinement.

Meanwhile, tearful and red-faced Rusalka did not overlook that their attention had strayed from her.

“Hmph! Don’t think you’ve won!”

The small assassin tried to use this chance to escape, but then she caught a glance of Boo Boo’s eyes. Despite his ferocious porcine face, he had a sad look in his eyes as if being yelled at had been a shock to him.

(…)

“Y-you’ll regret not finishing me off while you had the chance!!”

The assassin sent by the Information Broker shook off the brief feeling in her chest, twisted her body to escape Boo Boo’s support, threw off the bath towel, summoned her Percentage-type clothing back on, and planned to escape the hot spring. Steam rose from the small girl in no time at all and it looked like she would vanish beyond the white screen of the blizzard, but…

“Adwah!?”

Rusalka fully vanished into the cloudy water as if she had fallen into a bottomless swamp. Beatrice rubbed at her temple with her index finger.

“How did she think humans like us were in the same bath as 4-meter Boo Boo? We’d only laid out a duckboard made from Ladder Ivy at the bottom to give us a shallower area.”

“Squeal! It’s dangerous putting your head under the water, so we need to save her.”

Boo Boo alone was a gentleman.

He walked over to where Rusalka had disappeared and used his massive hands to find the slender girl in the water. She must have swallowed a lot of water in her surprise because her face was red and she had passed out, but she eventually opened her eyes a little.

“Poyaaa…ah!? Ahhh, no, no. Why am I feeling the suspension bridge effect!? And you! Why are you princess carrying me!?”

“That – is – my – line, you princess carry thief!!”

Beatrice was beginning a pretty serious eruption, so Rusalka finally managed to escape the hot spring in her soaked equipment and she ran off into the blizzard.

Filinion’s half-extended arm wandered through empty air.

“Ah! …Sh-she didn’t even ask how to change her settings. Does she plan to end up naked when she goes to sleep again?”

“Actually, if she goes to sleep in this snowy land, she’ll never wake up again. She still has no protection against the cold and the water will only chill her faster once it cools down…”

“Wow. So she’ll end up a naked girl frozen in a pillar of ice? That’s quite a niche sort of treasure. It sounds like something you’d find in the deepest part of a cave full of ice and crystals.”

Boo Boo and the others exchanged a glance.

None of them wanted to imagine a life they had saved turning into a human ice sculpture only 5 or 10 minutes later.

Part 6

They felt silly heading out to save an assassin sent for them, but they could not just let her die. And so they set out to search for Noble Dancer Rusalka.

However, something changed the instant they set foot outside the hot oasis.

“What? It’s cold?”

Beatrice should have been a mass of fire, but even she had to comment on the temperature. Filinion had been using her for warmth, so her entire body grew blue, starting with the lips, despite having warmed herself in the hot spring just a moment ago. The only one without much issue was Boo Boo who had been walking through the snowy mountain in only a loincloth to begin with.

The blizzard curtain grew even thicker and their vision was cut off by a whiteout once more.

“No, the lines of light between light sources are still active. Be careful, Boo Boo! This isn’t natural. Someone is artificially interfering with my Magic!”

She could produce fire and a bit of light and smoke, but it provided no heat. It felt like being trapped in a giant cold storage warehouse and staring at an image of flickering flames on an LCD screen. It was no use whatsoever.

Hee hee hee.

Bewitching female laughter reached them from the depths of the blizzard. Beatrice briefly thought it was an illusion created from the mixture of noise. Yes, like the groans heard at a famous suicide spot or the mysterious screams heard in a famous singer’s song.

But it was not.

The curtain brighter than silk was torn and someone appeared there.

She was a bright blue.

She had a tall and slender body and beautiful skin that was more pale than white. She wore a princess’s dress so transparent it seemed to be made from ice. However, there was no corset or bustier to cover her torso.

Only a single sheathed cross-shaped sword.

The straight sword extended from her chest to below her hips, hiding the important bits of her otherwise naked body and it was strapped to her torso by leather belts. The girl with splendid ringlet curls that fell past her knees almost seemed to act as the sword’s sheathe or seal.

She pulled an ice fan from her waist, spread it to hide her mouth, twisted her curvy body, and spoke.

All the while, her ringlet curls blew in the wind.

“It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Holy Swordswoman.”

“…And who are you?”

“I am Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau, the new queen of the battle arena after

your departure. And you can also think of me as another assassin from the Information Broker.”

She looked Beatrice’s way with surprising directness and crushed the transparent fan in her white hand.

Immediately, a hunk of ice taller than she was fell alongside her right arm.

The snow on the ground flew up and increased the density of white. At first the object alongside the blue woman’s right arm appeared to be a guillotine.

But it was not.

Five thick fingers seemed to wriggle at the bottom of the thick wall. It was a hexagonal snow crystal shield attached to a gauntlet. When Beatrice saw the striking spikes extending from each corner, a certain name came to mind.

“A lantern shield!? Why would you make that weird weapon even weirder!?”

“Oh? It would seem you have some slight education. However.”

The Ice Waterfall Princess laughed and controlled the five fingers of the hexagonal shield floating in front of her own fingertips.

“It is rather inelegant that the crucial blade must be supplied separately.”

Snow spiraled around the shield and a double-edged ice sword twice the Ice Waterfall Princess’s height appeared in her hand.

Wildefrau used her other hand to hold down the hair on the side of her head and she seemed to recite a piece of terminology.

“Zweihänder☆ This should suffice for testing out your strength.”

“Wait!” shouted Boo Boo. “I see no reason why we have to fight. And we have to find Rusalka who ran off somewhere…”

“Yes. She was supposed to be the hound while I am the hunter, but I suppose it doesn’t matter. That worthless dog forgot the honor I showed her by putting a collar on her and ran off in the middle of the hunt to escape my whip, so I have no obligation to look after her. Although if she does survive, I will give her a very, very geeeentle punishment.”

“You…”

“Now, then. Does that give you a reason to fight? Besides, she is none of your concern. You need only focus on running through the snow so I can enjoy the hunt. Toh!”

She made a horizontal slash.

Immediately a blizzard erupted as blood from the world’s wound.

Beatrice carelessly raised her Shining Weapon rapier and tried to cross blades with the giant ice sword, but she immediately realized her mistake.

The Ice Waterfall Princess did not approach.

With silent and careful movements, she actually stepped back beyond the screen. To her, a direct attack was unimportant. The snow grew more and more intense. The white wall covered everything.

“Kh…!! Is she trying to get us lost so we freeze to death!?”

The Holy Swordswoman raised her voice and received a response from unexpectedly close by. But she could not tell if it was an illusion or not because the blizzard was too thick to even see the end of her outstretched arm.

“Well, if that is the death you would like, I can fulfill your request. But be on the lookout for unexpected attacks. Heh heh. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

She gave into her irritation and swung her rapier toward the voice, but sparks flew as it struck Armelina’s metal staff.

“! She’s cruel through and through. Beatrice, you’re letting the blood rush to your head! Don’t play along with her rural train station Sentai show!”

“S-sorry…”

“Filinion, Boo Boo! If you can hear me, look to the ground and come here. Take it a step at a time. Trying to look into the distance will only screw with your sense of distance and direction! And don’t turn your head!”

They had only been a few meters apart, but Beatrice was still relieved to see them all again.

“I wanted to fall back to the hot spring before planning our counterattack…but it doesn’t look like we can do that.”

They had felt its heat not long before, but now this. Safely escaping this northern mountain was looking like a dream within a dream now.

“B-Beatrice, you fired illumination Magic into the ground on the way here, right? C-c-c-c-can we follow that back from the mountain or at least back to the hot spring!?”

“I did draw a line all the way *to* the hot spring, but we ran into the Ice Waterfall Princess as soon as we left, so I didn’t have a chance after that. That means we can’t go back.”

“Besides, we couldn’t get off the mountain in this blizzard even if we knew the route. You saw what happened at Amalgam’s counterfeit factory, right? The blizzards and avalanches change the landscape so frequently that the signs in the ground might have been swept away or buried.”

As she said that, Armelina lowered the metal staff from her shoulder. She then tapped the head against a thick layer of snow. An explosion created a distorted crater.

“Making an igloo would be the logical thing to do. The air will gather inside the snow walls, so it acts as an insulator, just like a down jacket. If we all get inside, our body heat will warm the air.”

“But…”

“I know. It’s only temporary. It only needs to keep us from freezing to death before we finish coming up with a plan.”

Either way, they had no time.

Boo Boo did not seem bothered since he had been half-naked and Magic-less from the beginning, but he worried about the sacrifices around him more than the average person. It was his heart that would break, not his body.

After entering the igloo, Beatrice held her shoulders and spoke quickly.

“First and foremost, this blizzard is being controlled by the Ice Waterfall Princess. The entire area is more than 10 below 0 and some kind of heat insulation is preventing my Magic from warming us. That means ‘waiting it out’ isn’t an option.”

“It’s c-c-c-c-cold! We already established we can’t leave the mountain with this blizzard in our way, so we’re going to have to defeat Wildefrau.”

“The question is whether or not we can capture her when our movements are restricted and she can walk around just fine with her 100% Water Resistance. It’s easy to lose track of distance and direction in this snowy world, so just walking through it will wear down our lives.”

They could not produce Magic heat even in the makeshift igloo and there was only one other way to preserve their body heat.

“The hot oases. We’ll have to walk from hot spring to hot spring while searching for Wildefrau.”

The maps they could summon using Magic showed a few dozen hot oases, but it was unclear if they could actually follow the map through the snowy plain. They would easily lose track of distance and direction and things could appear and disappear like the ruins of the counterfeit factory, so even apparent landmarks could confuse them.

“Armelina, how much of your map related Magic can you use?”

“Beatrice, it looks like you were their target from the beginning. I’m receiving almost no interference at all. I can tell the direction just fine, so don’t worry.”

The Fighter Priest’s words were reassuring. Even if the surrounding scenery was confusing, they had an absolute way of knowing which direction was which. Armelina used all sorts of blunt weapons and that had led to a specialty in magnets.

If they lost their way even once and failed to reach the hot spring, they would definitely end up as human ice sculptures. Their deadly march through the snow was about to begin.

“Boo. I’m also worried about Rusalka. If we find her, let’s carry her to the hot spring.”

“…That’s right.”

That might sound carefree given the extreme situation, but Beatrice felt that keeping those obvious things in mind would be an important factor in this battle.

“We can’t forget about that Noble Dancer, Boo Boo.”

Part 7

Beatrice’s group could not sit still and wait for rescue, so their only choice was to warm themselves at the hot springs as they searched as wide a range as possible for Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau. They walked through the snowy world a step at a time while firing illumination Magic into the ground at set intervals as markers.

But no matter how much they filled their minds with their goal and the logic of their methods, the blizzard still felt just as frigid. They were surrounded by featureless white in all directions. They felt a hopeless exhaustion in their chests, like they were searching for a single grain of gold dust in the middle of the desert.

“W-will this really work out? I’m not seeing suspicious footprints or anything else…”

Filinion shook a small bottle of some kind of potion, but her expression was grim. It was probably a potion that visualized traces of life readings, such as footprints. Only their own footprints were emitting a white light and those vanished as they watched.

“I guess footprints are buried in no time in this blizzard. Boo Boo, do you know how to hunt on a snowy mountain?”

“Boo. Food doesn’t rot easily where it’s cold, so you only have to find some leftover seeds or bones!”

That did not really apply in this case, but even if the Ice Waterfall Princess could resist the cold, she still needed food and water. Her strange princess dress looked like nothing more than a sword, belts, and ice armor over her naked body, so there was no room for large camping gear.

“Does she think this will be a short battle or does she think it’ll be easy to

acquire food and water when she can walk around freely?”

“If so, the meat and fruit would mostly be found in the greenery around the hot oases, wouldn’t they?”

It seemed unlikely they would just so happen to run into each other at the same hot spring, but if Wildefrau was using the hot springs to determine her range of movement, then their odds were even. Both they and the Ice Explosion Princess would leave traces behind at the hot springs and leave hints as to where they were headed next. From there, it was the same as two submarines working out each other’s positions from the slight noises they made.

“Anyway, I don’t know how much help this will be, but…”

“Armelina, what’s that metal spike?”

“It’s a pin that reacts to biomagnetism. After I drive it into the ground, my parchment map will display a blood alert when a living creature enters within 10 meters of it. That said, it’s useless against the lifeless Gimmicks in the Labyrinth.”

That sounded much more useful than walking around randomly trying to fill their map in. However, just thinking about it was not going to accomplish anything. They were still walking around a white hell.

“Pant, pant.”

The White Witch was out of breath in no time. Beatrice left behind illumination Magic and drew a line between them, but they could not trust those too much. They were no more than insurance.

But their situation was better than it might have been. Without cold-resistant Boo Boo pushing aside the thick snow like a bulldozer, the girls’ legs might have developed frostbite in no time. Then Boo Boo waved a hand.

“Filinion, if it’s really too much, you can stick with me. I’m warm, so you’ll be warm too.”

“Heee! Now! Hold me now!! Brrrrrrr…aaaahhhhhh!?”

The White Witch clung to him like her life depended on it, but Beatrice did not get after her this time. Thanks to the potion sprinkled over all their heads, they each had a soccer-ball-sized illusion sphere floating over their head. Boo Boo’s

was a healthy blue and had a bodybuilder-like smile, but the rest were a dangerous yellow or red with a troubled frown. When shivering Filinion clung to Boo Boo, her sphere's color changed slightly and the expression smiled a little. That vital signs display was determined based on one's temperature, stamina, muscular strength, hydration, etc., so it would change from blue to red as they declined and Xs in the eyes meant they were dead.

The initial window display had been full of more detailed information, but they had rejected that. As for why…

"Hey, cow pie factory! Why do these list our weight and measurements!? That's personal information!! It's got nothing to do with surviving in a snowy mountain!"

"Boo? Beatrice, what does this 79 mean?"

"Higiiiii!? Don't look, Boo Boooooooo!!!???"

That sad story ended with the glasses cow having her butt kicked by the Holy Swordswoman and Fighter Priest before being rolled down a hill, turning her into a slight human snowball. So if the White Witch claimed to be cold, it was probably more than just an excuse.

Beatrice suddenly looked up as she used her paces to keep general track of the distance.

"We're almost there."

"Assuming our sense of direction wasn't thrown off, you mean."

This first test would predict their overall success. And they found a source of steam surrounded by greenery.

Filinion's face lit up.

"A hot spring! A hot oasis! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

The White Witch threw her arms in the air, ran over, erased all of her Percentage-type Magic clothing save for her underwear, and dove into the hot water. She must have thought a woman's hair was her life because she had that held up by something like a kanzashi carved from wood, but it was meaningless when she dove in headfirst. Also, she had completely forgotten about the parts

of her she needed to be most worried about.

“Cow!! We have a few extra towels, so…oh, honestly!!”

The Holy Swordswoman grabbed the cow’s favorite bathing outfit from among the towels and threw it over with a sigh.

“But it does seem we made it.”

“Boo. But it doesn’t look like anyone’s been here. There are no footprints on the snowless dirt and none of the fruit has been taken.”

Boo Boo selected and pulled some Ladder Ivy from the hot oasis trees and worked with Armelina to quickly weave a duckboard.

“None of the water has been splashed on the edge of the hot spring either. … Well, except for where a shameless glasses girl jumped in. She isn’t drowning in there without the duckboard, is she?”

They could not be picky. While Boo Boo could walk around in the snow just fine, the others needed to raise their body temperatures or risk death. After dropping the duckboard in a corner of the hot spring, the Holy Swordswoman wrapped a towel around herself and deactivated her Magic armor and clothing within. Armelina also used a headband to keep her hair up.

…It could be easy to forget, but Boo Boo was a guy. The glasses girl had lost at life by giving into the cold and failing to take that into account.

After so long in the cold, the heat of the spring seemed to sting their skin. Toweled Beatrice’s face grew flushed as she settled on their next step.

“After warming up, let’s get back to searching for the Ice Waterfall Princess. Armelina, where’s the next hot oasis?”

“The closest one is about 200 meters south of here. But the map shows a steep slope and there might not be a passable route with the blizzard and avalanches. It’s a bit further, but it might be best to head west.”

“Ehhh?” With her glasses fogged up, Filinion interrupted like a spoiled child. “Can’t we just stay here? There doesn’t seem to be a Gate for Signing Out and we couldn’t use one even if there was since we haven’t registered our smartphones with it. We’ve got a hot spring to protect ourselves from the

blizzard and food in the greenery around it, so we'll be fine for a while. Isn't holing up here an option?"

"No, no, no! No one's coming to rescue us and the weather isn't going to improve if we wait. And what about Wildefrau!?"

"Well, that Ice Waterfall Princess is trying to kill us on orders from the Information Broker, right? That means she can't afford to fail and she'll probably have a time limit for completing her mission. So it seems to me she'll feel more and more pressure the more time passes."

"…"

"…"

The Holy Swordswoman and Fighter priest just about gave into the temptation of the hot water, but…

"Squeal. Then what about lost Rusalka?"

"Ah!? That's right, that's right. Besides, we can't stay in Ground's Nir for long. Waiting is a poor strategy for anyone here."

"Buuuut. Isn't that true of the Ice Waterfall Princess too? Bubble, bubble, bubble."

Filinion started sinking down below the water as she spoke, so Beatrice knew she was a lost cause. The actual argument no longer mattered. Filinion was only thinking about keeping them stuck in a loop so they would stay in the spring longer and find themselves unable to leave. She was probably the kind of person who could never get out of a kotatsu once she was underneath it.

"…"

Armelina was the next to speak.

"There's a blood alert on my map. Life sign detected. She may have thought she was hiding, but I'm betting a big Werewolf or Abominable Snowman approached and got her running wildly around. Here she comes!!"

And the cause of all this would be enjoying the situation most of all, so she would not let them just hang around here.

“Hee hee hee. Oh, you seem to be enjoying yourselves. Mind if I join you?”

The voice came suddenly.

Just as the 3 girls jumped out of the hot spring in their towels, something fell right in the middle of the water.

It was Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau.

“Hm. This is a little too warm for my sensitive skin.”

Alongside her right arm, she had summoned a large sword and a shield combined with a gauntlet made of ice. She used her other hand to elegantly hold her hair down as the floating lantern shield and sword dropped down, detonated the water’s surface, and pierced the ground.

The pond of cloudy water froze solid in an instant. Nevertheless, something odd happened around the woman with ringlet curls who stood in the space opened by the splashing water. A mysterious liquid carrying a white frost began to appear on its own and fill the space.

Beatrice hurriedly summoned her Percentage-type armor inside her towel, causing the towel to burst off of her, and narrowed her eyes in displeasure. As soon as a leaf fallen from one of the trees came in contact with the mysterious liquid, it froze.

Beatrice and the others’ vital sign displays quickly changed from blue to yellow and from smiles to troubled expressions. Yes, as if they had been thrown out of the hot oasis and into the blizzard.

“Liquid…nitrogen!?”

“If you like, I could prepare some oxygen or hydrogen instead. Ahhhhh…. A bath really is better for your health and beauty when it’s a tad lukewarm. Ah ha ha!!”

The Ice Waterfall Princess soaked herself up to her fully exposed shoulders in the liquid nitrogen bath she had summoned. Her magnificent ringlet curls spread out and she crossed her legs so just one of her blue boots stuck out. There was no need for Magic to read her vital signs. She was a picture of health despite a temperature of -195 degrees. But Beatrice and the others could not get too fixated on that insane visual.

“Boo Boo, hurry! We need to get out of here!!”

The hot spring itself had frozen, but they were still benefiting from the surrounding heat. And while liquid nitrogen was known for causing flash freezing, its volume would increase 700-fold when exposed to normal temperatures and returned to its gaseous form.

Wildefrau snapped her white fingers.

That threw out the safeties maintaining that unnatural situation.

A fierce explosion followed.

With a blast louder than a gunshot, the nitrogen forming the liquid shot up more than 10 meters as an intense pillar of mist. It had the same force as when a mine was detonated out at sea. Of course, they could not let any of it touch them. Their only option was to leave this safe zone before it poured back down.

The soft dirt, fruit-bearing trees, and the rest of the hot oasis had frozen solid behind surprised Boo Boo.

In the center of it all, 100% Water Resistance Wildefrau laughed and watched her targets leave.

“Yes, make a run for it. Anywhere you stop, I will freeze you out. Now, can you capture me before I eliminate all of the hot oases? Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“!”

Beatrice clenched her teeth, but they had to leave for the time being.

Another major limit had been set: before all of the hot oases were gone. If they failed, they would be stuck in this hopeless snowy world and they would all become human frost sculptures.

Part 8

Instead of continuing on to the next hot oasis, the Holy Swordswoman's group built an igloo near the original hot spring. They all clung to Boo Boo for some faint warmth, waited a while, and made a U-turn.

The frozen remains of the hot oasis were abandoned. A ton of nitrogen had been splattered around, but when Beatrice lit a small fire at the end of her rapier, it did not vanish. The biting wind had apparently been swept away.

Filinion sprinkled around some of the potion that caused footprints to glow, but…

"Any luck, curry girl?"

"I'm a White Witch, not the Yellow Ranger! Don't call me beef curry!"

"Stop it. Looking at it that way, Beatrice, you'd be the festive red and white kamaboko girl."

"Shut up, matcha girl!!"

"Shut up, matcha girl!!"

"I'm not an old lady and I do have some fat!!"

Confused, Boo Boo tilted his head and brought a hand to his mouth.

"What does all of that mean?"

"Pant, pant! W-well, whatever the case, I didn't find anything."

This was no longer a hot spring. The footprints had been easily erased by the blizzard.

“Well, I didn’t really think that Ice Waterfall Princess would show a convenient opening. Armelina, you said the nearest hot oases were a dangerous one to the south and a safe one to the west, right?”

“Assuming she hasn’t gotten there ahead of us and frozen them.”

Whatever the case, they had definitely arrived here before the Ice Waterfall Princess. Her range of movement was sure to be within a circle of this point, so the closest hot oases were indeed the most likely suspects. Either because Wildefrau needed food or water, or because she wanted to mock them.

They resumed their march through the snow.

Armelina drove a map-linked sensor spike into the ground.

“Let’s start with what we know we can do. The western one is more distant, but we won’t get lost. And even if it’s frozen, there should be several hot oases nearby.”

“Let’s just pray they aren’t *all* frozen.”

But they soon discovered another issue. As soon as they set out, they spotted a lemon-yellow glow fluttering in the snow.

It was Noble Dancer Rusalka’s hair where she was collapsed face-down and half-buried in the snow.

“Dammit, I knew this would happen to her! Boo Boo, pull her out!!”

“Right. Leave it to me.”

Boo Boo trudged on ahead and pulled Rusalka’s small form from the snow. She must not have changed her settings because her equipment had vanished.

“Let’s hope she doesn’t catch cold…”

Boo Boo always only wore a loincloth, so he was more worried about her health than her shame. He took a towel from the Holy Swordswoman and crudely wrapped it around the girl. Cold-resistant Boo Boo was their sole source of warmth.

She had nothing to do with this, but even Filinion clung to his back.

“I-I-I-I can’t stand it anymore, Boo Boo! The water cooled down so fast and it’s

sapping my endurance gauge like crazy! Help me!!”

Beatrice picked up the 9-shaped disc scythe left in the snow.

“Cow, the vital signs display over your head is bright blue with a full smile. You’re perfectly fine.”

“With a self-indulgent kotatsu-addicted girl like her, you can’t let her get even a taste of luxury.”

(If Wildefrau shows up with her Zweihänder while we’re all crowded together, Boo Boo won’t be able to move and we’ll be wiped out, won’t we?)

Armelina and Beatrice kept an eye on their surroundings, but luckily, there was no sign of such an attack. Or was their opponent only toying with them? It felt like the Ice Waterfall Princess’s malice had permeated the entire snowy world around them.

Their slow progress gradually wore at their nerves, but they finally reached the next hot oasis. It was not frozen. Beatrice’s body relaxed, but her mind knew she could not celebrate. Not running across Wildefrau had not been a lucky break. It was proof that they had yet to escape her grasp.

Regardless, treating the unconscious Noble Dancer came first. Beatrice stuck Rusalka’s scythe into the water to test the depth and then they dropped in a duckboard they made as before. Boo Boo then lowered the girl’s small body feet-first into the white cloudy water.

This had dramatic results.

“Wah…wah, wah. Wagyaaaahhhh!? A-another hot spring and again no towel on my head!? My cuticlllllllllllllllllllllllllllles…gaboh!?”

Rusalka’s scream grew muffled at the end because she had started to run, stepped off the duckboard, and dropped into the depths of the hot spring.

“She just doesn’t learn, does she? C’mon, stay still! Humans aren’t made to be frozen and thawed so often! Not even a convenience store bento full of preservatives and additives can do that!!”

In a two-piece bath towel and a headband, Armelina fished Rusalka’s skinny arm out of the water instead of overly gentle Boo Boo.

As before, her eyes had melted.

“Poyahh…ah! Ahhh, no, no! Why am I feeling the suspension bridge effect for another girl!?”

“I don’t exactly want some girl I ran across falling for me! And is just anyone enough for you!?”

They had no choice but to hold her shoulders down so she could not leave the water. They had only found her by complete coincidence and they wanted to avoid any additional missions while pursued by that insane Ice Waterfall Princess.

Meanwhile, the curled ponytail girl was completely ignorant of their efforts.

“Kh. Once again, I’m reduced to a single towel. Does that mean you saw everything when putting it on me!?”

“I’ll tell you how to change your settings, so just calm down. Ahhh, bubble, bubble, bubble.”

As a cold-weak kotatsu girl (?), Filinion began fully submerging herself until the vital signs sphere above her head returned from red to blue and from troubled to a smile.

The Noble Dancer wrapped a towel around her head and sat in the water while she listened to the White Witch’s useful lecture. Everything slowed down and a stagnant air hung over them, so Boo Boo spoke up.

“You should come with us for the time being. That way you won’t get lost.”

“I-I wasn’t lost!”

“You were either lost or you were a nuisance of a hiker. Do you want to go around apologizing afterwards?”

“Gnhh!”

“I’ll give you this,” said Boo Boo. “It’s Hot Spring Ice Cream! Everyone gets irritable when they’re hungry, so eat this and calm down.”

“H-how dumb do you think I am?”

Well, she had attempted to climb a snowy mountain in only a leotard, gotten

herself frozen, fled from a hot spring while mostly naked, and turned herself into a chilled dish, so the answer was “extremely”, but Beatrice avoided answering and put on a smile as big as one on a round yellow sticker.

Towel-waring Rusalka must not have been the type to waste food because she ate what was given to her. She held the small egg shell container in both hands and started by squeezing her eyes shut and sticking her small tongue out to lick the top of the ice cream, perhaps to test it for poison.

“Oh, it’s actually pretty good…”

“A weird flavor, isn’t it!? It’s sweet and cold. The outside is hard but the inside is all melty! I don’t like hot springs because they make it hard to think, but eating something like this is perfect.”

“Yes, visiting a hot spring on a frigid mountain and then eating cold ice cream really is the greatest luxury. And with the eggs and milk, you even get the sugar and protein you need.”

Rusalka started to relax, but then she came back to her senses.

“Wait, no!! Don’t let yourself be distracted by something like eating ice cream in a kotatsu! They’re my assassination targets!!”

“About that.” Beatrice cut in there. “I don’t know what the Information Broker told you, but what do you think after actually meeting us? Are we deserving of death? Has even Boo Boo done anything that bad to you?”

“…”

“We had no real reason to search for you since you’re an assassin. In fact, even if we happened across you, we could have just kept walking. But when Boo Boo saw you half-buried in the snow, he ran over to help you. You ran from the hot spring without knowing what you were doing, but he didn’t complain about having to save you. Now, a question. I want to hear it from you directly: Have we done anything worth having everything taken from us by someone we’ve never even met?”

There was no reply. But this was different from a simple refusal to answer. This silence was born from hesitation and doubt.

Eventually, Rusalka hung her head and spoke while still holding the egg container of her half-eaten Hot Spring Ice Cream.

“…That isn’t going to work.”

“Why not?”

That question was not asked in desperation. The Holy Swordswoman narrowed her eyes as all heat left her voice. The Noble Dancer had to understand that, but the girl with a towel around her lemon-yellow hair continued.

“Because this has nothing to do with what I want or think is right.”

The look on towel-wearing Filinion and Armelina’s faces changed too. That was a mercenary’s answer. It reminded them of the plant Break News that had helped the Religious Society the other day.

But.

“This is a contract to get back someone very important.”

That was overturned.

She was fulfilling her mission with no concern for her own principles, but she also had a pure objective.

And on top of that…

“I mean, you were the ones that stole Gruagach Onee-sama’s future in the first place!!”

Part 9

All hell had broken loose for Rusalka’s group when they had taken their precious recovery potions deep in the Labyrinth and realized they were only colored sugar water.

They had argued and shifted blame. Who had been in charge of them? Who had bought them? Who had not noticed? It had been more than enough to form

a deadly fissure in a group with no specific ideals that had been simply gathered via online recruitment.

None of them had learned any Magic that would help them escape, and that only made things worse. They had all scattered and desperately sought the exit on their own. Once they finally reached open sunlight once more, they saw far fewer familiar faces than when they had gone in. And they had all widened their eyes in surprise when they saw Rusalka was among the survivors.

That was when she noticed that the others had crossed a line. They had held onto the counterfeit recovery potions. They should have dashed the containers against the ground and started for the exit, but they had realized they could fool someone else with these clever counterfeits and they had traded with people in the Labyrinth to heal themselves along the way. …And they of course had no idea what had happened to the people who had trusted them and made the trade deep below the ground.

They could not allow any other method.

Their sanity depended on the idea that they had had no choice and it had been the only way they could have survived. When someone found themselves stranded and were forced to tear out the hearts of and sip the blood of those who had already died, they could never accept that there had been another way to survive.

Rusalka had realized they would kill her.

But not to suppress the truth. Their broken and twisted methods had allowed them to return with a smile, but that only worked without Rusalka's alternative solution. Her presence prevented them from rejecting the idea that something inside them was superior to their immoral persistence.

And yet…

"I pray you have a wonderful day."

It had happened in an instant, like the arrival of a flash of light.

By the time she had realized that giant meteor was a Magic arrow, it had already been over. The insanity of their inescapable delusion had made it an unbreakable wall, yet this casual afterthought of an attack had carried such

conviction and strength compared to it. That was something Rusalka had lacked. She had had nothing beyond the rare Job of a Noble Dancer, so this light had been too bright for her.

The attack had been made by Summon Hunter Gruagach.

Rusalka had looked up to her at first. She had never invited her to the deadly Labyrinth for fear of tripping her up, but she had spoken with her whenever she saw her in the inn town. She had gladly worked hard toward anything that would be useful for her and she had rapidly developed her rare Job. The way that woman with long, beautiful blonde hair had spoken behind a veil had possessed an allure and mystery not found in Rusalka.

Curiosity killed the cat.

When she had peeked behind the veil, Rusalka had greatly regretted it.

She had found the Religious Society. That wicked Guild had been born from the chaotic religious world. Gruagach seemed to be a central member of the Guild.

Rusalka had wanted to do something for her.

She could not have done anything on her own and Gruagach had refused to listen. And she had known something bad would happen if it became clear that she knew Gruagach was a part of the Religious Society. The stickiness she had occasionally felt was far worse than her former party members.

So she had thrown out her pride. She had tried everything she could, expanded her circle as far as she could, and worked to accomplish something she could not as an individual.

A Noble Dancer's fighting style was better suited for a group battle between humans than exploring the Labyrinth. Her impatience, longing, and need for strength had further honed her.

And it was not always the humans of the inn town she had relied on.

"Hmm. What an energetic young girl."

Rare and colorful plants grew in the Flask Flower Garden among the mountains. Central among them was a Break News and the greatest of the Mandragoras. That queen named Ileana seemed impressed with her. Was she

impressed that Rusalka had entered this remote area, that she had spoken to this queen without fear, or that she was still intent on rescuing someone from the powerful Religious Society after everything that had happened?

“But everything comes with a price. For every contract, I demand a virgin girl. And in this case, it would seem you are the only option.”

“…”

She had not been conveniently thinking that only she would escape unharmed.

If she had been asked to tear out her own heart and offer it up, she would have. She had been afraid, pained, embarrassed, and frustrated enough to feel her head burning, but that was just how important this was to her. When Gruagach had solved her problem, it may have been no different from dealing with a pebble on the roadside or a weed along the sidewalk, but Rusalka never could have dealt with that on her own. All of her supposed party members had held their Shining Weapons out toward her, so she would not have been here now without Gruagach’s help.

So she had made up her mind.

“…That’s fine. You can take whatever you want from me. So please help me save Gruagach Onee-sama, Ileana!!”

“Hah hah!!”

This time, that bewitching flower laughed with delight.

“Words are mere decorations. I am satisfied hearing the determination inside you. Very well. I, the greatest of the Mandragoras, shall take on this job. I will help Gruagach for you.”

Rusalka really had collapsed to the ground.

She had been so relieved. Everything was going to work out. She had not known why Gruagach had become the Religious Society’s vanguard, but she had gained a Break News on her side. That giant organization may have been frightening to a human, but that would not matter against this monster. Ileana was sure to save Gruagach from any number of enemies, just like a superhero in a movie or drama. She would do what Rusalka could not.

However.

Nevertheless.

Word had reached her just the other day.

Ileana had been defeated and the Religious Society had been destroyed.

What had happened to Gruagach after she was manipulated by Demon Lord Tselika and wreaked havoc on Tokyo?

Rusalka had realized something then.

…She had been only a step away and the difference had been paper thin, but she had not at all made it in time.

Part 10

They did not actually exchange many words at the hot oasis. But all sorts of information had to have been spiraling through the Noble Dancer's head all the while.

"I have to settle this…"

Rusalka parted the cloudy water and slowly stood up.

Below the towel, her wet body was covered by a leotard-like outfit and asymmetrical armor. The towel burst off and her hair twisted into a curly ponytail on its own.

"Otherwise I can't repay Gruagach Onee-sama while she's bound by the chains of her crimes!!"

She was equipping for battle. No, in this case the weapon and armor may have been a sign of rejection.

Rusalka raised her 9-shaped disc scythe and used the bottom of her thick metal boot to kick something like a lever near the bottom. Immediately, an engine-like roar burst out. The scythe's disc blade began to rapidly rotate.

But the Noble Dancer did not manage to swing around her scythe like a baton. Some frightening interference cut in before she could.

“Oh, now this is surprising. The hound that pathetically fled into the forest has actually latched her jaws onto the prey’s leg.”

The steam parted and a beautiful face emerged. She held her hands behind her back, bent over, and peered up at short Rusalka’s face from below. This newcomer with large, straightforward eyes was of course Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau.

They all immediately jumped back like they had been repelled.

“Tch. Did she slip past the map-linked sensors!?”

“As developed as it might be, it is still human Magic. It is the same idea as all locks being unlockable.”

The woman could drop the temperature enough to liquefy the air and they had already seen her use the flash vaporization of liquid nitrogen to instantly freeze a natural hot spring.

“Good job, Rusalka. I will give ‘her’ some consideration now. Hee hee. And here I thought I was going to have to punish her in a dark room.”

“Ice Waterfall-…!?”

Beatrice started to cry out, but they did not have time to form up and face Wildefrau. Once they all escaped the hot spring in their own way, the all-encompassing white ice mist detonated. The nitrogen explosion was a curtain of death that included the still-liquid droplets of the mist. Splitting that apart and travelling through it would be far too reckless.

“(Boo Boo, this way.)”

“Beatrice? Boo, where are the others? Where are Rusalka and Armelina…?”

“(Not so loud, Boo Boo. You’ll give away our position. Anyway, this way!)”

Beatrice entered big sister mode and held his hand to guide Boo Boo away from the frozen hot spring while the safety of their allies was still unknown.

“Armelina…everyone…”

“I understand how you feel, but we can’t wander randomly in this blizzard. And…huh? I feel like we’re forgetting someone…”

“Brrrrr. I’dsh me. Eberyone’sh shunshine, Filinion, is righd here…”

Holding her shoulders (and pushing her large breasts together), the White Witch staggered over from surprisingly close by.

She really was hard to see with her white clothing. But she was already clinging to Boo Boo’s waist to help the vital sign display over her head recover its smile.

(That means we don’t know what happened to Armelina, Rusalka, or Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau. 1-against-2 is not the best situation…)

Beatrice left that unsaid because directly informing Boo Boo of her concerns would cause him to panic and run off in search of Armelina. Even if he was resistant to the cold, he would be in trouble of a liquid nitrogen water gun hit him from a blind spot in the white curtain or the wind direction sent a dense section of the gas silently sneaking up to suffocate him. Not even Boo Boo could handle this on his own.

“Calm down, Boo Boo. We have to continue on the same as before. This snowy plain might be large, but Armelina isn’t going to stick around in the cold if she can help it. Let’s go search the nearby surviving hot oases. That would be the easiest way to regroup with her.”

“Really? We’ll really be able to find Armelina and Rusalka? I don’t want to abandon them. I know how lonely it is to be left behind. Beatrice, if you say yes, I’ll do anything.”

Beatrice prepared to give a firm nod, but the shivering glasses girl interrupted from the side.

“B-b-b-but that route would be obvious to the Ice Waterfall Princess, wouldn’t it? If she catches up to us or lies in wait for us, we won’t be able to wait around there. Plus, we can’t use the map or compass without Armelina. Not to mention the sensor readings. This really doesn’t seem like a good time to start wandering randomly…”

(I should really strip her naked and roll her up into a snowball!!)

Beatrice almost made that threat out loud, but she held her tongue. If Boo Boo panicked, it really was over. With his giant frame and great horsepower, it was hard to stop him once he lost control.

"…"

But surprisingly, Boo Boo did not yell or run. He lowered his head a little, thought silently, and then looked up again.

"Boo. Wait a moment. The Ice Waterfall Princess is going around destroying the hot springs. That means we know we'll run across her if we stay at one of the hot springs, right?"

"Um, Boo Boo?"

"And if she's a cold expert and can't do anything other than that, none of this makes sense. Boo. That's right. Why did she even show herself initially? If she only wanted to bully us with her coldness, she didn't need to meet us."

Boo Boo twitched his large pig nose as he sniffed his own upper arm and chest.

"Sniff sniff."

"Boo Boo, what are you doing?"

"You too, Beatrice. Sniff sniff. Your hair, armpits, and thighs too just to be sure."

"Gyaaaahh!? Wait, Boo Boo!?"

Beatrice blushed and pummeled the big round cushion that was his face, but it did not seem to affect him at all.

"Beatrice and Filinion."

"Wh-what?"

"Fuheee. I-I'll die without your warmth, Boo Boo…"

The level cap group was tormented by their limits in this blizzard, but Boo Boo held a hand to his mouth and made an announcement.

"I think I've figured some things out."

Part 11

Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau moved through the snowy world.

She touched the skirt-like ice armor as if pinching it and her feet stepped silently on the snow.

The sexy girl had magnificent blue ringlet curls, a cross-shaped sword strapped to her torso with several leather belts, and thick ice armor that provide the outline of a princess dress. There was no concern on her face. When the temperature was more than 10 below 0, the passage of time was a powerful weapon. Due to the differences in planetary rotation speed, atmospheric content, and basic gravity, she could only stay in Ground's Nir for so long, which meant she had a time limit herself, but the grim reaper would never tap her shoulder first.

It meant a lot that she could walk freely through this environment without having her stamina worn down and that she could accurately locate her target even within the blizzard. She might as well have been seated in an absolute throne.

The Ice Waterfall Princess was a hunter. She would follow her prey's tracks, injure them, and repeat the process until the fleeing fawn ran out of strength. This was not restricted to a snowy mountain. At the inn town's battle arena, she would disguise it as an accident and she would do the same thing when assassinating someone in the Labyrinth with no witnesses. She would continue doing this in the future.

(Hee hee. So they're still intent on relying on the hot oases, are they? They know it's dangerous, but those fawns will continue playing the same card even as it wears them down. Now, what should I do this time?)

She only had to follow her prey's tracks, judge how fresh they were, and cover everything up in freezing temperatures. Whether living or not, she would win if she eliminated anything that moved.

(But repeating the same thing can be so boring. Oh, I know. It might be fun to

freeze the entire pool of active volcano magma at -195 degrees to cut off the overall source of heat. Then all of the hot springs on the surface will freeze over.)

She approached one of the sources of steam with that in mind. She would crush that small shelter.

She parted the steam and set foot in the hot oasis. And at that very moment…

“Take this, you tasteless and odorless Western Yuki Onna!! Hot Spring Ice Cream Bomb!!!!!!”

“If we throw this many, at least one of them’s sure to hit you! Take this, and this!!”

It did no damage.

And that was why the Ice Waterfall Princess stood stock still as the entirely unexpected downpour hit her. The White Witch squeezed her eyes shut and threw them with her left and right hand equally ineptly, but a bombardment was still a bombardment. Wildefrau quickly covered her beautiful face with a white hand, but the attack still hit her. The solid-looking projectiles easily split from the impact. The contents got on her exposed arm from wrist to elbow. She felt the gooey substance burst and a sticky liquid got on her hair, forehead, and cheeks. From there, it dripped to her chin, neck, and ample chest. It had a distinctive sweet aroma that caught in her nose. As the unpleasant smell and sensation dirtied her bright body, the blood vessels bulged out at her temple.

“I…can’t…”

The Ice Waterfall Princess boiled over at the meaningless impurity that made her feel like she was surrounded by foreign hooligans.

“I can’t believe you!! You pieces of shiii

“I’ll kill you!! I’ll kill you and then wash this filth off of me! Ohhh, I’ll go crazy if I can’t wash everything from the end of my hair to the tips of my fingers! What is this sweet and sticky feeling!? It’s disgusting!!”

Nevertheless…

“Squeal! Beatrice, Filinion. I know I made the request, but you didn’t tell me you would be wasting food. There had to have been another way!! Hmph!!”

“Don’t panic, Boo Boo. The reason we don’t waste food is because we need it to live. We might be using it differently here, but if it’s keeping us alive, it doesn’t count as wasting it. Isn’t that right, Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau!?”

(…?)

The queen’s heart leaped. That yell was accurately directed at her through the blizzard’s curtain. It felt as odd as having the monster speak to you from the screen while watching a horror movie.

(They shouldn’t be able to judge my distance and direction here. So how?)

That was when it finally occurred to her: the unpleasantly sticky feeling violating her forehead, cheeks, neck, and cleavage.

“The ice cream… No, the distinctive smell of the Super Sweet Leaf herb!?”

“Boo. Is it that surprising? It’s the same thing you were doing.”

“It would be easy enough for a low-temperature and freezing specialist to create an icy hell, but that doesn’t explain how you accurately tracked us through that blizzard’s curtain.”

“So you had to have something more than your coldness: smell. It wasn’t because you didn’t want Beatrice and the others to get warm that you kept showing up at the hot springs. You were afraid they would wash off their smell.”

“Once we thought about it, it was obvious you didn’t need to greet us with that ice sword if you could have frozen us to death from the get-go. That shield and sword look impressive, but they were just a bluff to secretly get the scent you wanted on us. It was like a stage magician’s wand. And while your lantern shield looked like a Swiss army knife with that gauntlet and the blades, its primary feature is *the lantern inside it*. You only had to swap out the illumination

candle inside for an aroma candle. Miss Strongest put a lot of effort into this behind the scenes."

(That may be true…!!)

None of this process was necessary for the Ice Waterfall Princess. She could indeed send a blizzard across the entire mountain without ever appearing before them.

(But the Information Broker insisted I hurry. I might be able to kill them, but it would be a problem if I had to dig through the mountain and only found their frozen corpses half a year from now, so I had to directly pursue them. And now they're showing off that extra step like they've already taken off the demon's head.)

But however it had happened, the conditions were even now. Wildefrau had Hot Spring Ice Cream on her hair, face, and chest, so she gave off a distinctive sweet smell. The average human would be unable to detect it, but the air was incredibly clear in this snowy world where even microbes had difficulty reproducing, so smells stood out. They tended not to mix together, so a stranded person's shampoo or nail polish could sometimes be smelled from several hundred meters away on a rescue mission.

And…

"Prepare yourself. My nose isn't just for show. I can sniff out Jewel Truffles and Tree Hollow Honey. I'll never lose track of you now!"

(…Not good.)

The Ice Waterfall Princess finally managed to focus on reality despite her anger.

Wildefrau avoided flashy fights and preferred the low-risk and surefire victory of waiting for her opponent to freeze to death.

Yes.

She had 100% Water Resistance and would take no damage from the freezing temperatures, but her feet were buried in the deep snow the same as anyone else's. Simply put, her speed was restricted as long as she was fighting on the

snowy mountain. Whether fleeing or fighting, that was not a fun handicap to have. That was why her surefire methods were similar to those of a sniper or combat engineer: move slowly, wait in hiding, and secure the best position for an unavoidable attack.

"Not good…!!!???"

Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau spoke aloud and abandoned her calm. Specifically, her right arm. She shattered and left behind the hexagonal shield combined with the gauntlet and did the same with the Zweihänder. They were only the handkerchief and wand during a magic trick. They were meant to disguise that she was placing a marker on her opponent by using the rose essence candle from upwind. It was no longer time for her to distract them by swinging it around.

She needed an all-out attack from head on.

She would use her true power as an Ice Waterfall Princess.

"…Fine then."

The girl with blue ringlet curls took a few steps back and grabbed the true sword with her slender arms. This one was not a fake made from ice. It was her true Shining Weapon. The sheathed cross-shaped sword reached from her voluptuous chest to her hips. One hand held the hilt and the other the sheath. Then the leather belts binding her body were released one after another and the ice dress shattered. It was like a strange seal was being broken.

In fact, the queen herself may have acted as the seal and the sheath while wearing only the skimpiest of underwear.

The way she arched her back and drew the blade vertically made it look like a cruel ritual in which a frozen blade was drawn from her soft belly.

"Behold the true power of an Ice Waterfall Princess in the bewitching light of my Shining Weapon. I will give you a generous taste of absolute zero: another world where all things – water or air, liquid or gas – grow solid!!!!!!"

A single swing of Wildefrau's sword would solidify all gases in the world and drop both temperature and air pressure to absolute zero. Gravity itself would exist, but it would feel a lot like being flung into distant space where the light of

the sun barely reached. Would they simply freeze, would they asphyxiate, would their blood break down like a severe case of altitude sickness, or would they suffer a painful death as the pressure difference forced the organs from their bodies? With so many competing causes of death, it was a cruelly powerful form of anti-personnel attack.

The only one who could survive this white hell was Wildefrau who had the 100% Water Resistance needed to repel all freezing attacks and who could convert solid oxygen and nitrogen into gas to preserve the pressure and breathable air. She could slay any opponent with a single swing of her sword. That deadly blade was no longer sealed. It rose a few centimeters from its sheath and the blue blade could be glimpsed. It would all be over once she drew it. She would settle this.

Or so she thought.

However…

Boo Boo's giant hand suddenly split the white curtain and grabbed the sword from above the pommel before she could draw it.

(Ah…)

She should have noticed.

Boo Boo was more than twice her height, so the same depth of snow would not hinder their movements equally. Its grip on them was different. And with his greater muscular strength, his mobility on the snow was entirely different.

Also…

(The weakness of an *iai* attack that uses overwhelming speed is that the momentum of the drawing motion can be entirely negated if the sheath or your wrist is grabbed before you can draw the sword.)

The Ice Waterfall Princess's cross-shaped Shining Weapon had to be drawn before it could have any effect. At this rate, it would remain uselessly sealed.

(So I'll have to respond in the *iai* way. I made sure to learn some *aiki* and joint locks in case this happened!!)

That said, Wildefrau was not an expert in ancient martial arts. Plus, no amount

of skill was going to overcome the advantage Boo Boo had with his 4 meter body.

But she did not need to throw him.

She only had to move even closer and get his large hand away from the sheath. As long as she drew the sword, victory would be hers. And due to his great size, he would have trouble attacking her if she moved in close. It was the same as being unable to put your hips into swatting a bug crawling on your own body. And his Shining Weapon could be mistaken for a log or steel beam, so it would require a fairly large space for a full-power swing.

She only had to make him hesitate for half a second…no, a third of a second. Once she drew the ice sword, she could create the vacuum pump needed to remake everything into solids and turn this open space into outer space.

Approaching by twisting her sexy body covered only in the skimpiest of underwear proved effective. The giant hand sealing the hilt moved away slightly, creating a gap.

(You're mine…!!)

But she should have realized something else. What would happen if a human approached a tiger, even if that would seal away its maximum strength? What would happen if they tried to embrace a wild elephant?

She soon received her answer.

Wildefrau's sword stopped once more. The giant hand had left the hilt, but Boo Boo was no longer targeting the skinny sword.

He targeted the entire slender Ice Waterfall Princess herself.

His far too burly arms wrapped around her, but this was not an expression of affection. His frightening strength truly reduced the distance between them to 0mm. Their bodies held the sheathed sword like a vise and it would not budge.

The Ice Waterfall Princess was certain of her fate.

Her opponent had never been concerned about her Shining Weapon. So what had he been after, what had he grabbed, what did he hold…and what had he come here to destroy?

“Ah.”

With only the skimpiest of underwear covering her naked body, the violent princess looked up at the mass of odorous muscles and gave him a stiff smile even as he tightly squeezed her.

“Ahn☆”

Then the squeezing and cracking sounds of the horrific bear hug filled the snowy world.

Part 12

The powerful blizzard – which, thinking back, had been unnaturally powerful – had calmed down. The sky was still ruled by thick leaden clouds, but the pure white curtain that robbed one of any sense of distance or direction was gone.

The white world had seemed endless before, but it did not seem so bad now that the storm had cleared up. The temperature felt about 10 degrees different.

“Ah, ahh… Boo Boo’s body and Beatrice’s recovered flames. It’s like a flower in either hand. Oh, I might earn some divine punishment for this kind of paradise.”

“Hold it, cow. Quit clinging to me. And I want nothing to do with those slimy glasses.”

“Uuh. But now that I’m warming up, I feel a pressure in my crotch…”

“God, you are such a pain!!”

Their spherical vital sign displays were smiling normally and the flame frame map matched the scenery around them. The harsh but beautiful snowy mountain was back to normal.

And so it may have been inevitable that they noticed the sounds of clashing weapons and the light of flying sparks.

It was Fighter Priest Armelina and Noble Dancer Rusalka.

The blunt weapon and wind users were dancing around the open snowy plain.

Rusalka wore a tiny golden crown, a black sleeved leotard, asymmetrical armor on her chest and hips, and a thin cloth that wrapped around her back like a *hagoromo*. She fought differently from Beatrice and Wildefrau who forced their way through with overwhelming firepower.

Rusalka rode the current.

If she was surrounded by snow, she would use gusts of wind to blow snow into the air or create vaporization heat. If she was surrounded by a wildfire, she would send in oxygen to intensify the flames. If she was attacked by dirt, she would blow it into the air to trigger a sandstorm. Instead of going for a collision of power, she would capture, parry, deflect, and ultimately send back her opponent's power. That was how she presented her strength.

She had likely strengthened the Ice Waterfall Princess's power up until now. Armelina had no heat source, so some of her hair was frozen. It was unlikely her feet were unharmed under the snow.

The Fighter Priest's metal ball-and-chain and the Noble Dancer's yellow disc blade were still clashing head on and scattering sparks everywhere. The scythe with the rapidly rotating disc blade did not force its way through. Instead, it was light. It swung vertically and horizontally. She would sometimes bend over and place its long handle on her small butt or form a bridge with her entire soft body and support it on her navel as she spun it around like a baton from every possible angle. All the while, it deflected Armelina's metal ball and sent it flying irregularly away.

It was like juggling a chainsaw. Her muscles, joints, and even the collarbones and ribs visible through her black leotard looked flexible when she moved like this. If Armelina let it bewitch her for even a second, she would lose her life. The slightest touch of the rapidly rotating disc blade would likely slice off an arm or a leg if not bisect her entirely.

"Armelina!! Rusalka too!!"

"You can't, Boo Boo!!"

The Iberian Orc tried to run over, but Beatrice quickly stopped him.

“The situation is too complex. If we try to help Armelina with our fire or strength, it could get caught in the wind and hit her!!”

And it was not like they had not helped at all. Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau had been defeated. Rusalka could not use the unnaturally low temperatures anymore. The extreme cold would no longer sap Armelina’s strength and the white curtain would not throw off her aim. The situation had changed.

The blunt weapon pushed through the air.

Each time Armelina swung her ball-and-chain, it tore into the snow and triggered an explosion, but that failed to stop the Noble Dancer. The bell inside the tiny golden crown on her head rang lightly as she instantly adjusted to the changing situation. As the slender girl continued her spinning dance, the rapidly rotating scythe deflected the metal ball and the Magically-produced wind would unnaturally alter its direction. Just as it looked like the ball would hit the snow right in front of Rusalka, that snow would fly into the air, the wind would catch it, sharp shards of stone would enter the white curtain, and the Fighter Priest would be the one struck by the storm of projectiles.

The number of audible explosions was uncountable.

As they both swung their weapons, they also exchanged words.

“You’ve noticed the change too, haven’t you!? The Ice Waterfall Princess’s power is gone while Boo Boo and the others have shown up. Acting the hound on the vanguard is pointless when the main unit isn’t going to show! Fall back, Noble Dancer. You can’t win here!!”

“…up.”

The short girl with her bodylines showing through her black sleeved leotard bit her lip while sometimes using the yellow disc blade to smash stone into projectiles, adjusting the rotation speed by kicking the bottom of the handle with a thick steel boot, and blasting snow into the air as a smokescreen.

“Shut up! I’m not falling back. I won’t get another chance. I need to prove I defeated all of you here! Because…because if I don’t, Onee-sama will…”

Rusalka only referred to one person that way: Summon Hunter Gruagach, the poor puppet of Demon Lord Tselika. What about her? Was it that important to

use a childish duel to cleanse the humiliating defeat of a friend? That was how Armelina viewed it, but she had forgotten something.

Back at the hot oasis, the Noble Dancer had said this had nothing to do with what she wanted or thought was right.

In other words, her crime was not motivated by a grudge.

And what was the other possibility?

“You don’t even know where Gruagach Onee-sama is being imprisoned!! If I don’t defeat you, I can never save her. She’ll never be able to break the chains of her crimes and crawl out of that festering hell! So I have to do this to free her. No matter how much I have to dirty my hand in the process!!”

Finally, Armelina felt like she had grasped the crux of the situation.

Gruagach had caused severe damage to Tokyo while controlled by Tselika, so of course she was not just going to be let go. It was laughable to think the monsters confining a young girl to the Detached Magic Palace for their own convenience would give any thought to rehabilitation.

They did more than just make up for a loss; they would take advantage of the tragedy to double or triple their wealth. When everyone else was suffering from war or disaster, they were the reprehensible ones who would reach for easy profit in the name of reconstruction and recovery.

Gruagach had caused a lot of damage. But what if she could be used as a controller to get a level cap Wind Element expert to do their bidding? The Pieces that caused technological revolutions were proof that Magic could bring great profit. Just as they kept Beatrice closed in the Detached Magic Palace, they held the blade to Gruagach’s throat, bound Rusalka, and dug for a new oil field or valuable lode.

“Then…”

Armelina clenched her teeth because she had seen that same method herself.

“Then why would they ever release her!? They’ll never let go of you! They’ll suck you dry, to the very marrow of your bones!! Until the oil field has dried up and the lode has been fully excavated!! They’ll have you run a full marathon!!

Rusalka, think this through again. Ask yourself if obeying them will really make anyone happy. You'll never be able to repay Gruagach like this!!"

"Even so…even if it's all a farce…"

The girl would not stop even as she faced ruin. She never would, so long as leaving these rails meant throwing someone dear to her into the abyss. So long as she remained bound like this.

"Relying on others wasn't enough. Ileana's presence was so great that I forgot that I had to tell the world my thoughts myself! If I do it through someone else, it loses its purity, like in a game of telephone!! So how can I stop now? Nothing will stop me from standing in the line of fire and giving up my life to reach my hand out to Gruagach Onee-sama!!"

It was the same as seeming to freely draw a card from the deck while actually being guided by the sneering magician.

"I can ask myself 'what if'."

She had the voice of someone spinning a roulette wheel that would never pay out.

The person she most cared for was being used as a shield, her heart had been cornered and torn to shreds, and she clenched her teeth in coldhearted determination, but she still howled from the bottom of her throat like she could not bear it.

"But the one thing I can't do is give up and pull back my hand. Onee-sama is right there in front of me and she needs my help! So it doesn't matter if I can't win. I don't care if I don't stand a chance. What else can we do but rely on the tiny miracle prepared for us with a sneer!!!???"

Her thick steel boot roared. As soon as she kicked the bottom of her scythe, an odd change occurred. The rapidly rotating disc blade burst apart and transformed into a giant crescent moon blade held together by a thick wire. The decorative string attached to the inside of the disc blade and the back of the handle must have been made to link it together like a train's cars because it had been absorbed into the scythe somewhere.

The hoop had had a diameter of about 70cm and this crescent moon was more

than 200cm long.

Armelina was already in the lethal range, so Rusalka's ferocity targeted her neck and also sent countless vacuum blades where she might try to dodge. The look in the short girl's eyes said she did not care of Armelina died. Not if it would save a certain life.

But the Fighter Priest did not falter. In fact, that look was why she did not.

That was enough of a reason to ignite her soul.

"You goddamn…
moroooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooon!!"

When she swung down her metal staff, a bolt of lightning followed it down. No, it was a massive hunk of metal. A weapon colossal enough to mistake for a meteor or asteroid caused the ground to sink down by more than 70cm. This was more than just the snow. The solid ground itself sank.

Rusalka could not follow it down, so she remained in the air. She desperately twisted her supple hips, but she could not produce a significant motion vector without her feet on the ground.

"Wha-!?"

Shooting Star.

Armelina had taught herself a few pieces of Magic for linking her maps with sensors because she had wanted some targeting support to help this major technique hit. It had ultimately not been much help, but even if she could not hit her target, she still had ways of using it without hitting them. After all, its destructive power could sink the ground by more than a meter over an area the size of a school campus.

Left in the air, the Noble Dancer's dance froze in shock. She had never imagined her enemy would secure a space to move further down than the ground. Armelina calmly slipped below the deadly winds and safely approached Rusalka.

"What should you have done when you hit a dead end?"

A large steel fist appeared on the end of her metal staff.

And the Fighter Priest declared her answer while swinging that giant fist.

“That’s easy. Instead of relying on a miracle, you should’ve come ask me for help! No matter what it might be!!”

There was only one sound of impact.

Even with the Percentage-type clothing amplifying her body’s abilities, she was helpless against a blow to the face with a blunt weapon that could knock out an elephant. Boo Boo and the others looked down at the crescent moon scythe and the lemon-yellow assassin sprawled out on the snow.

Beatrice asked a question with her hands on her hips.

“You shouldn’t just make unconditional offers like that.”

“I don’t like having to do this, but I guess I have to explain how the world works to you. When you’re really in trouble and someone’s life is in danger, there’s one thing you should always try before relying on miracles. …Honestly, they’re supposed to teach you these things at a safety lessons puppet show in elementary school.”

The Fighter Priest rested her metal staff on her shoulder and winked as she answered.

“You dial 110. Then you let the police officers handle it. And they’ll do a better job of it than any American comic book superhero in full-body tights.”

Part 13

Extraterritoriality. What comes to mind first when you think of that term? Perhaps an American military base or a moored nuclear aircraft carrier. Perhaps an embassy or consulate. Perhaps the blue license plate of a foreign diplomat.

It was generally a privilege for foreigners, but here it was granted to a local.

The Shirokanedai district of Minato, Tokyo had plenty of extraordinarily large

estates with a great variety in design, but one especially oppressive-looking dark red mansion made of granite was known as Shirokanedai's Last Free Territory. That Bloody Residence had lured in more than 500 innocent citizens of a certain country and used its many traps to feast on their blood. It had been bought, disassembled, and shipped across the ocean so it now stood here as a "historic" mansion.

"Cough, cough. Oh, honestly…!"

There was a red carpet, an ebony desk, and a fireplace heating the air. The old record player only played classical music and this gentle world seemed to say that even jazz would be considered a heretical newcomer, but that was disturbed by the coughing voice of a small girl with short black hair.

This was the control room. It was the heart of the mansion hidden behind a disguised bookcase in the master bedroom. It was lined with metal pipes. They reflected light and sound like periscopes and speaking tubes so that it was always obvious where a victim was screaming in their death throes or when their paranoia led them to destroy each other.

In a certain "neighborhood" it was whispered that if you wished to settle an old grudge, public or private, you only needed to pay a certain old man some money. The more money paid, the better the game he would prepare.

The old man in a gown was maintaining a bladed weapon. Its odd shape was closest to a spear, but it looked more like a butcher's knife had been attached to the end of an old mop handle. And that description was not inaccurate. However, its value was more obvious when it was described as a weapon used during a revolution and ultimately used to decapitate many guards after the fall of the Bastille.

Unlike Japan, the name of the blacksmith was not given much importance in the West.

A blade's meaning came from the land in which it was made and the lives it had taken. Just like the holy spears of old.

"What is it, oh great Ice Waterfall Princess? It isn't often you return without time to heal your wounds with Magic."

“Cut the sarcasm. Cough. Cough!!”

Dark red blood spilled from between the fingers covering the slender girl’s mouth. Everything she wore was soaked with blood: the bandages worn on her right arm as fashion, the intentionally torn T-shirt and shorts, the bra allowed to show through the torn shirt, and the stockings worn on just the one leg. Even the floor was colored by her blood. The old man did not know how much the carpet cost, so he did not mind. But not in an aesthetic sense; he was simply not interested in the purchase of daily items.

“Pant, pant. I thought this was supposed to be an easy job. Ahh, I can’t believe this!! Where’s that star student!? The Student Council President! Is she still in the bathtub!?”

“I appreciate the help in maintaining my tools, but don’t overdo it.”

The shorthaired girl with bandages on her arm and an eyepatch on her forehead ignored the advice and moved to a corner of the control room.

The room’s interior was not at all concerned about harmony, so there was a white bathtub there. It contained a lot of ice and a girl. The living sacrifice’s brown hair was long and soft and she was bound with her legs folded up and her hands behind her head. Not many people could have correctly guessed what her clothing had originally been. What had apparently been a school uniform’s dark blue blazer had been almost literally torn to shreds, she had leather bands around her entire body, and her joints were fixed together with metal bars.

“How do you do, Lady Gruagach? It’s a chilling thought to think it might have been me in the bathtub if things had been a little different. Hee hee. Gh… cough!!”

“…”

“Pant, pant. It’s said that the cold numbs your pain, but that is an issue of degree. Flick your ear in midwinter and it might just hurt more than you expect.”

The restraints were probably entirely unnecessary because the long-haired sacrifice could not move properly. And there was fear in her barely-opened eyes. That was because the shorthaired girl had stuck both hands in plastic gloves.

“Your adoring Noble Dancer went off and died on her own.”

Despite the half-dried blood staining her lips, the shorthaired girl with mismatched shoes smiled cruelly.

“So how about you pay the penalty in her place, Miss Star Student? Have you grown accustomed to the electric stimulation? Then how about we increase that to ‘labor pains’ or ‘birth’ today?”

The metal bars covering her body were capacitors that produced high-voltage currents. And the electrodes attached to carefully calculated parts of her limbs and torso would vividly reproduce various types of pain. In a violation even greater than licking across every part of her body, a great explosion would shoot straight to the untouchable core of her body.

She knew that, but the bathtub sacrifice could not respond any longer. Shaking her head would not change anything. She doubted there was anything here that could tell right from wrong.

“Now, now. Calm down a little.”

The old man in a gown looked troubled, but he did not stop polishing his revolutionary spear.

“Perhaps I am misunderstanding. I have no way of knowing what happened in Ground’s Nir, but is it possible you left and Signed Out before the Noble Dancer did?”

“…”

“Look, here is a photo sent by the Noble Dancer. She did quite well. She stole and destroyed the Shining Weapons of all 3 level cap targets and even the Iberian Orc. They can’t Sign Out without those, so only eventual death awaits them. And it will be interesting to see how long a naked human who can’t use Magic will last on that island.”

The bloody shorthaired girl with an eyepatch on her forehead was briefly confused.

Then she held a hand to her mouth and muttered some words like a curse.

“Oh, no…”

Immediately, she heard a loud crash like a dump truck had slammed into a

large tree.

At the source of the noise was a woman in glasses and a tight suit who had her long black hair tied back. She had a long object resting on her shoulder and she had mercilessly kicked down the mansion's front gate. Her movement support suit was doing well tonight. The standardized bodyguards in black suits and sunglasses first pulled out legal police batons, but she dealt with them using a sweep of the long object on her shoulder. As she strolled toward the moonlit dark red mansion, she did not hesitate to destroy the front door with a long leg.

While the servants and accountants panicked, the only one to realize what was going on was the elderly butler who had seen more of the bloodline's history than his master. He bent over and bowed to welcome the unexpected visitor.

"Welcome, ma'am."

"Yeah, *that*'s what's going on. No hard feelings, okay?"

The tight suit woman smiled a little and undid a few of her blouse's buttons.

Sharp sounds immediately intersected.

She grimaced at the dull pain in her side. The fabric of her coat ripped and her stockings tore, but she lightly smiled at the elderly butler who had knocked over a decorative suit of armor as he collapsed to the floor.

"You won't aim for a woman's face even at a time like this? …You're making me want to recruit you, old man."

But she did not have time to coax him now. More standardized bodyguards rushed out from further inside. Shirokanedai's Last Free Territory had effective extraterritoriality, so they gave up on staying legal and pulled out stainless steel blades and handguns.

But the tight suit woman did not care.

Each time she spun around and let the long object fly, the many guards were sent flying. Distance and range did not seem to matter. However, this was not some special weapon. This long object could be found anywhere.

(Who would've thought a lure fishing pole would one day become a secret

weapon?)

The fishing pole used a weighted contraption to send it flying with a snap of the wrist, so it became a decent weapon just by tying several weights to the end of the line. Even as a projectile, it could be retrieved by reeling it in, so she could ignore the concept of ammunition except for keeping a spare on hand in case the line got tangled.

That said, a sports fishing pole and line were simply not sturdy enough. That was why the tight suit woman had procured a pole made of the same special steel used in a tank's suspension and a wire made from the same spider web structure used in bulletproof vests. The weights were of course tungsten steel. Hand-reeling it would be a pain, so she had chosen a fairly ugly electric reel.

Altogether, she had constructed a strange projectile with infinite ammo that did not violate the Swords and Firearms Control Law. She could accurately hit someone's head at a distance of 30 meters and she could use it as a curved flail weapon at midrange. When the weights had been fully pulled back to the end of the pole, it functioned as a whip with a deadly head at close range.

"Ah!"

"Gbah! Gyah!?"

As proven in World War One when various new weapons had been so effective even their inventors' balls had shriveled in fear, standardized soldiers were poor at handling situations outside their training. A never-before-seen weapon or tactic was the best source of confusion. And that could easily lead to more damage than would normally be possible.

The woman held a hand to her ear and gave instructions over her headset.

"Team B, the target hasn't escaped out the back, have they!?"

"This is Inoue. We wouldn't screw up like that. We're covering all the exits and we have control of their cars and helicopter. Can you believe this? They have what looks like a whole chess board's worth of luxury foreign cars underground here. I bet you could buy our entire residential district with what these cost."

"Make sure you seal off the sewers too. I don't know if these rich people are willing to throw out their pride, but it never hurts to be careful."

“We already are. I came all the way to Shirokanedai and now my 29,800 yen super luxury suit stinks of high society piss! You monstrous chief!! You dominatrix! Please step on me!!”

She swept aside more assassins and rolled out of the way of the guillotines and arrow traps installed in the mansion itself as she continued further in.

After breaking down a few doors and knocking down some men in black, the tight suit woman arrived at her destination with the lure fishing pole resting on her shoulder.

There she found an old man in a gown lovingly polishing an antique that entirely ignored the Swords and Firearms Control Law and a young girl who was coughing up blood.

“Ah, aohh, ughahh!!”

The girl tried to grab something like a poker that seemed to be chilled with dry ice or something contained in the grip, but the woman did not hesitate to bury an iron fist in the center of her face.

“Oh? You’re surprisingly deficient in the real world, Ice Waterfall Princess. In both brains and body.”

That level cap girl flipped backwards, knocked over a heavy ebony desk, and sent a bottle of brandy and a glass to the floor, but the gowned old man did not bat an eye.

“Who are you?”

“Armeliiinaaa.”

She named herself in a singsong voice and the old man glanced at the documents scattered on the floor.

The glasses woman kept the long object on her shoulder.

“You lot have a way of mistaking cowardice for caution, so you’d have gone into hiding if I didn’t give you something to put your mind at ease. Those destroyed Shining Weapons are pretty well made, aren’t they? By the way, what counterfeit factory do you think we used to make them?”

“…”

“And about that. A certain somebody might have purged the counterfeit factory itself, but my guess is that was cutting off the lizard’s tail. Someone couldn’t have the problem rising back up to them, could they? Assuming, that is, that someone who can’t afford to get into the counterfeiting business – such as a mint or a national bank – brought their knowhow to another world where no one could recognize them and used the name Amalgam to get into a certain national business. Black money isn’t only distributed in this world. The Real Money Trade run between worlds is quite common. That’s why people like me keep a close eye on the movements of the gears used as currency in Ground’s Nir.”

The old man did not carelessly open his mouth. There was no one here anymore. The old man had no words for the girl who was wide-eyed and trembling. Anything you say can and will be used against you. That was the ironclad rule of a certain world.

“No need to fall silent. I forced my way in here, ruining half a year’s worth of covert investigation. I’m not here about that.”

“Then what are you here for?”

“Let’s settle things with Summon Hunter Gruagach and Noble Dancer Rusalka. Especially that Student Council President, since Beatrice and Boo Boo left her in my care. I promised she would be fairly tried and given a chance to redo her life. Your unwanted intervention has stained the work of our police officers. You understand, don’t you? …Or do I need to break the dentures in your mouth and drag you around a bit, old man?”

“*That* is what you want?” The gowned old man did not even stand from his chair. “Are you unfamiliar with this country’s system? No one can be tried for anything done in another world.”

“It’s true no one can be charged with murder or involuntary manslaughter if someone dies in the Labyrinth. No one would go exploring if that could happen. The current system is hopelessly money-obsessed and cruel.” The woman winked through her glasses with the long object on her shoulder. “But what about something done while here on Earth? There’s precedent, such as the Real Money Trade being judged an economic crime. For example, ignoring all the official

paperwork and keeping a high school girl in your private residence would count as imprisonment. And sending an email ordering our deaths would count as a threat and contract killing.”

“…”

“Now. You don’t actually think you can get out of this with the old ‘my secretary did it all and I knew nothing’ excuse, do you?”

“…You do not seem to understand.”

The old man in a gown seemed to be forcing out the deep words. His voice was even sharper than the illegal revolutionary weapon he held. A normal person would have trembled, but the tight suit woman scoffed. A truly confident villain was not so loquacious.

“This is Shirokanedai’s Last Free Territory. I can never be tried by this country’s system. Grandstanding here will only lead to your own demise. I will make you rue the day you were born a woman, little girl.”

“You’re surprisingly cowardly for a member of the Conference Room. Mixing in your own desire only weakens the threat. Or are you merely borrowing their authority and you’re just a subcontractor working under them?”

She cracked her neck.

This time, she smiled fiercely with the eyes of a hunter facing her prey.

“I thought it was well-known in this ‘neighborhood’ that there was a gathering of police officers and JSDF officers who grew fed up with their organizations’ restrictions and turned in their resignations. *Well, that’s the official story anyway.* Or did you not have authorization to view that data?”

“…”

“C’mon, now. After hearing that, do you really think this starving wolf is going to take even a single step back from the fattiest sirloin imaginable?”

“……
……”

“Oh, I almost forgot. I have a message from Rusalka, Onee-sama.”

These last words were not directed at the old man.

The police officer used a lighter tone as she spoke to the person in the bathtub of ice.

“No matter what happens, she swears she will rescue you this time.”

The rest did not take long.

The gowned old man stood up with enough force to knock his chair backwards while holding the revolutionary spear that had soaked up historical blood and the tight suit woman calmly lifted the long object from her shoulder.

Long-Lived Royal Elf Sibyl's Live News☆

The Secret to Health and Beauty! An Attack on the North’s Hidden Hot Springs

Pant, pant. I’m sick of covering scandals. It’s wrong to wish for people’s misfortune. So to soothe my damaged body and soul, today I am visiting the northern mountains which are known for their hot spring therapy. Surely

nothing terrible can happen to me with this kind of heartwarming news story.

There are actually dozens of hot springs in the northern mountains. Hidden hot springs suddenly appear in the middle of the snow and they are called hot oases because they are so similar to those desert water sources. Their effects vary. The humans place all their focus on the underground Labyrinth, but the northern mountains are a complex arrangement of various mineral resources. Depending on what areas the branching underground water veins pass through and how the magma heats them, even neighboring hot springs can have entirely different effects. Hot spring water is said to be a panacea, but it sounds like you would need the help of a guide to find the hot spring most suited for your needs. If you want to tame a local Werewolf or Abominable Snowman as a guide, you need to bring some raw meat with you. And if your souvenir freezes, they'll just eat you instead, so be careful.

Now, is this the hot spring that's good for a trick back? …I mustn't lament how old that makes me sound. I'm not known as a long-lived Royal Elf for nothing.

Wait.

What is this? What in the world happened!? The hot spring is completely frozen over! Ah, and it looks like a powerful blizzard is blowing in… Now I'm all alone out in this snowy world with no heat source. What's going to happen to meeee

Chapter 3: Shooting Ride!

Part 1

If you were going to establish a private detective agency, it had to be in Shinjuku. The type of people changed greatly between the bar district, in front of the TV studios, or near the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, but no other area contained as much information from aboveground society and underground society alike. Choosing a restaurant to kill some time at would let you overhear the careless complaints and gossip of people from all sorts of industries.

The fastest way to blend into an area was to actually live there. And so the private detective agency rented out a room in a rundown multi-tenant building there. The room was only slightly less yellowed than a park bathroom, but Tokyo was insane and it still cost as much to rent as a family apartment in another prefecture.

The air conditioning was nearly dead and the computers were from who knows how many generations ago. In that office, a beautiful woman in a tight skirt and glasses faced a young man. They each held a clipboard and they were reading something while using red pen to check something off.

“Asamura Reina. Age: 24. Sex: Female. Born in Kyoto and lived overseas from 18-22. Majored in medical psychology and works as a counselor. A sexually frustrated young woman who looks good in glasses, a white coat, and a tight skirt.”

“Hey, Inoue, does this mean I’ll be driving around in a red Italian car loaded with a V12 turbo engine? Isn’t that more of a guy car?”

“Don’t worry. The target is into cars. If he thinks you understand his tastes, he’ll be putty in your hands.”

“But a salty dog is way too much of a guy drink. Can’t I at least go with a dry martini?”

“Pff. A woman who orders a martini when out at the bar alone is already pretty-…ow ow ow ow ow ow ow ow!? Y-you can’t let anything get to you like this out there, you know!?”

As the tight suit woman struck the young man’s head with her clipboard, a young newcomer carried in some coffee and animal cookies. She had apparently chosen the coffee beans herself and baked the cookies herself.

She was a high school girl with long brown hair. In the other world, she was known as Gruagach.

“Working hard, I see.”

“…Man, things sure are different with a young girl around. This place was so lacking in femininity before, so…dabah!? What was that for, chief!? Don’t kick me!!”

After puffing out her cheeks and delivering her foot to her subordinate, the tight suit woman held one of the mugs between both hands. She must have had trouble with hot drinks because she blew on it several times and then stuck out her tongue to test the temperature.

“Inoue will eat them all if you let him, so you should take your share now.”

“No, I already posted a picture on Nanskagram, so I don’t need any.”

The career woman froze in place while still testing the coffee with her tongue.

“Wh-what? High school girls show off their cuteness like that these days!?”

“Um?”

The girl looked confused.

The trembling tight suit woman checked the personal page of the handle name and ID she was given and she found an unbelievable number of digits. This was reaching as many people as a small broadcast station.

“N-no… A photo of some homemade animal cookies has more than a million ‘sures’!? Is this the internet that connects the world together!?”

“Yeah, recipes and pet training tips always do well,” said the young man. “And just adding an English description really increases your capacity a lot. Really, I can’t believe the people who immediately start posting selfies as soon as they start Nanskagramming. It’s like they’re putting their self-consciousness on full display. We don’t care about your normal face, so show us something about your lifestyle we can use to get to know you. Do they think they’re an amateur idol or something? Bwa ha. Bwa ha ha..h-hot, hot, hot! Don’t place the bottom of your mug against my forehead! It’s burning, chief! Don’t just leave it there!? Hoooot!?”

The blazer girl tilted her head while hiding the white ribbon on her chest behind the tray she held.

“Um, what are you doing here?”

“Looking over the script and putting together a role. We’re a secret division that performs investigations the normal police can’t to pave the way for something official. Sting operations are a standard starting point. And bringing down one organization causes another organization to rise up in its place, so we’ll always have work to do.”

The girl with the tilted head showed no sign of the Religious Society anymore, but she had not actually lost her faith. She still had a small cross hidden in the chest of her uniform. A long chat with the religious adviser at the hospital had apparently been very helpful for her. As far as the tight suit woman was concerned, she would be free to go once a compromise was reached.

The woman took a sip of coffee and reached for the sugar pot.

“But this really is a pain. Couldn’t you have come up with an easier role to play, Inoue!? You know I’m terrible at playing these mature types of women, like a schoolteacher or a secretary!!”

“Yeah, you are less feminine than Huldra-chan who I turn into in the other world. My bad, my bad.”

“…”

“P-please don’t just fall silent like that. Heh…heh heh.”

While the snake glared at the frog, the girl looked curiously down at the clipboard.

“If you have her be picky about only using imported furniture, wouldn’t it make her seem more like a high class woman?”

“Eh? W-well, I can easily fake that by messing with the online shopping history.”

“And here you can say she only wears custom-ordered underwear. That would give a sexual hint to the profile which would…um…more easily gather a gentleman’s attention…”

“Th-that’s a good point. Let’s see.”

The two adults quickly grabbed their red pens and faced their clipboards again. Left alone, the girl pondered the information, hoping to be useful in some way, but then she spoke up as if humming.

Yes, that blazer girl was the unattainable flower and outstanding Student Council President of a prestigious school.

“Come here, boy. I have much to teach you tonight.”

The tight suit woman was willing to forgive Inoue for spitting out his coffee and holding his nose with a hand. But when he also bent awkwardly forward, she kicked him and his chair over and stared into the distance.

(Sigh. Maybe I should go drinking again today.)

Part 2

“Boo.”

One day, Boo Boo came to a stop and looked up at an impressive structure.

“My house is made of bricks now.”

He tilted his head in confusion, but he was the kind of person who would begin using the new furniture that appeared when he woke up. He gave it no further thought and walked in.

It was still a single large room inside, but there was a smaller building next to it. It was crudely made and forced him to circle around to the side to go in, but he still investigated.

As soon as he opened the door, steam billowed out at him. The unique sweet scent of a girl hit him like a thick wall. Sutriona was sitting on a bench inside. She was naked except for the large tropical leaves known as Ghost Bento Wrappers wrapped around her chest and hips, making something like a tropical-style wild bikini. The bench was built for Boo Boo's size and would have been like a wall to a normal-sized person, but she had apparently jumped up onto it regardless. She rudely had one leg bent up on the bench like she was sitting half cross-legged. Improved blood flow meant her milky white skin had grown somewhat flushed.

"Oh, Boo Boo. You should knock before entering."

"Sutriona, you need to think about how to explain this."

"Mh." The Fairy Queen with a leaf towel around her head moved her eyebrows a little. "Fine then. When we Fairies visit a sauna, we wrap our bodies in medicinal leaves to trap in-…"

"I'm pretty sure that isn't where to start explaining this."

It was a rare sight for the Iberian Orc to play the tsukkomi. The Fairy Queen re-crossed her legs in quite a risqué way and snorted.

"The Fairies rebuilt your house before, right? They upgraded it from leaves to logs. That set a precedent. Now that they knew they can do that, they upgraded it further. Forgive them."

"So that's what happened."

"And as I am their queen, they asked me for advice. They wanted to know what kind of new feature you would enjoy. And, well, um, I kind of set aside what you would want and went with what I would want. Forgive me."

"So that's what happened."

Boo Boo, man among men, was not fazed even when faced with an emergency on the level of finding someone had swapped out your computer's entire OS. Since the Fairies' work could not be adjusted for anyone else's convenience, he could only choose whether or not to accept it.

"Squeal. But why are you cooking yourself in an oven, Sutriona? Are you being punished for pulling a prank on someone? If so, I'll go apologize with you."

"No, you imbecile. This is a way to stay healthy. You could call it a kind of bath."

"…There's something wrong with all of you. Why do you all want wet noses and fuzzy minds?"

"Boo Boo…?"

Sutriona spoke in a low voice and emitted a bewitching light from her eyes, but Boo Boo refused to approach. He did not try to enter the sauna.

After a while, the Fairy Queen left the steamy bath without closing the door and got in a large bucket of water next to the outer wall (while still wearing her leaf bikini that was held together by unknown means). It was a lot like metal drum bath.

"Ah, that's my drinking water for the day!"

"You fool, the drinking water is inside the house. This is the bathwater I prepared for myself. But I'll turn a blind eye if you get too hot and bothered and sneak out to drink it during the night. Hah hah!"

"Boo. Even if it's one of your pranks, it would be a waste to throw out all that water, so I'll use it to water the garden."

The perverted carrot gave a cry of protest from the field out front, but it was unknown if it had reached the house's owner or if she would avoid being watered with Sutri-juice. Sutriona relaxed her entire body inside the bucket that was a perfect fit for a small girl like her and clearly was no use for Boo Boo even though this was his house.

"Ahh… Toxins build up in Fairy blood, so it's very important that we regulate our blood flow, Boo Boo."

“Really?”

“Yes. So when we’re extremely pissed, it influences our blood flow and we lose control of the toxins. That is why we choose to hold important discussions in saunas. …In the past, that difference between growing pissed or not destroyed a beautiful lake. A holy ground known as the Womb Pot was transformed into a toxic bog. It’s a lot like the root beer floats that humans make. All the contamination is on the surface and everything from the middle down to the depths is fine, but I still feel pretty bad about that one.”

Sutriona was still one of the paradoxes with a soul known as the Break News. Even a casual chat with her provided glimpses of a legendary disaster.

Part 3

“Oh, so Gruagach ended up at your place, Armelina?”

The inn town took its name from the many lodging facilities there. One room in such a facility was wood patterned and only contained a simple bed and side table. The Holy Swordswoman sat on the windowsill which had its curtain closed and she held the large leaf of a decorative tropical plant between her fingers. Its aroma was stronger than normal because the pot was filled with a bluish jelly instead of dirt. The aromatic components passed through the roots and stalk and then left the leaves along with the moisture.

Armelina was lying face-down on the bed with all her equipment but her underwear deactivated and Filinion placed a towel over her hips.

“Yes, she’s on probation. Although we can only let her make tea or organize documents at the moment. Besides, even if she was the leader, she’s a minor and she was in a state of diminished capacity, right? We can’t just gang up on her and peck at her. Then again, it pisses me off that Inoue is too stricken with her to get any work done. …Dammit, and a new weapon isn’t always a good thing. You really feel it later when you use muscles you don’t normally use…”

Filinion looked at Armelina's back and pulled out a bottle of herb oil she had made by Mixing.

"I see. So that's why your back is so tense."

"Ah? You're implying I'm not very feminine, aren't you!?"

"Now, now, officer. I'm saying I'll reward your service with a massage. Here we go."

The White Witch dodged the issue and poured the oil on her defenseless back.

"Hyaaah!?"

"Hee hee. Oh? So you do have some femininity."

"You did that on purpose! You're supposed to warm the oil with your hands first!! Hyahn."

Filinion silenced Armelina's protests by pressing her palms into the oil on her back. She started by spreading it out across her shoulder blades.

"Warm it with my hands? You mean like this?"

"Don't think I'll forget this…"

Armelina trembled and blushed as she swore to take revenge, but Filinion talked nonchalantly.

"The 'adults' were humiliated by letting Tselika escape, so I know they had to single someone out to save face. But still."

"Ahh, ahh. Kh! But how can they push around a kid in need just to protect their own pride? That has the opposite effect. It's like wearing a custom-fitted suit but forgetting to zip up the fly. But more importantly…"

Armelina raised her index finger while still lying face down. A rectangular frame made of thin chains and a bubble appeared.

"This is the problem. While I was making a mess of the Shirokanedai mansion, this turned up: a document that seems to show a connection between the Conference Room and the Sage. It's only fragmentary, though."

"The Sage…"

The Sage had a deep and broad knowledge of Magic, they were suspected of purging Boo Boo's village, and only slight contact with information about them had led Skull Wave and Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau to attack. It was still unclear if the Sage was an individual or a group, but they were not just a vague legend. Their deadly fingertips really were approaching Beatrice's group's throat.

"Based on this document, it looks like the Sage didn't actually give the order. It's more like the Conference Room did it to curry their favor."

"We can probably assume that's how they tend to do things. The Sage can't be heard saying it directly, so the others pick up on the clues and do it for them…"

"None of this is certain of course. Now, Beatrice. What are you going to do now? To be honest, there isn't much we can do back on Earth. The Sage's identity and hideout are unknown. But things are different here. Nothing's holding us back here and we can walk around the entire island in only 3 days. If we wanted to, we might be able to track down the Sage with a thorough search."

Of course, that might mean acting hastily and attacking the Sage prematurely. If the Conference Room was truly acting alone and the Sage was not at all involved, they could introduce a misunderstanding that earned the Sage's true anger. And with a world-renowned VIP like the Sage, that could cast a serious shadow on their lives.

On the bed, Filinion moved her hands down to Armelina's hips. Armelina let her do as she wished and she had mentioned that none of this was certain. The Holy Swordswoman thought about that for a bit and then opened her mouth.

"Armelina, you hold onto that document. My management smartphone might be monitored by the Detached Magic Palace, so it would be best if I didn't make a copy. I don't want to get Iroka in trouble by letting her see something she shouldn't."

"Since you're playing this defensively, should I assume you're really going after this? Keep in mind we're up against the Sage here."

Yes, this person had proposed the existence of Magic and another world, which had changed history just as much as Da Vinci or Einstein. They also had the skill to easily remove the limits of life, as seen in Skull Wave. Their power and

influence were both the real deal, so this was not an opponent to face halfheartedly.

But Beatrice did not hang her head.

“Either way, there’s a lot I want to ask them, such as the attack on the Iberian Orc village and the giant Shining Weapon left with Boo Boo. …And I’m not the type to sit around in fear of a coming attack. We need to get actively involved in this to at least judge the level of the threat.”

“I see. I’m glad I exchanged contact information with you. But what about you, cow? Are you prepared to listen to the rest?”

“I get the feeling the world would treat me as one of the Three Stooges even if I said no here. I mean, Skull Wave and the Ice Waterfall Princess wouldn’t have any reason to attack me personally otherwise! If they’ll attack me even if I don’t know anything, I have to go along with this to defend myself! Wahhhhhn!!”

The White Witch held her head in her hands, realized she had oil all over those hands, and screamed even louder, but her butt never rose even a millimeter from the bed. In fact, she did not even glance back toward the door. Beatrice was honestly glad she had such good companions.

“Then let’s get down to business. …Nkh!”

“Oh, excuse me. Armpit, armpit.”

“You can skip the armpits…hyah…ah hyah hyah hyah!?”

Filinion recovered quickly and moved her fingers to Armelina’s armpits, so Armelina began flailing her arms and legs around while lying face down. Even as she struggled, she somehow managed to open a new frame. It contained the document obtained during the search of the mansion.

“Pant, pant. I said the Conference Room is trying to curry the Sage’s favor, right? That means even an old man at that level can’t get an audience with the Sage whenever he wants. …But that old man and the others like him didn’t like that, so it seems they were working through official and unofficial channels to divulge the Sage’s identity.”

“Th-that sounds like a good way to get the Sage mad at you.”

“In diplomatic relationships, secretly digging up information on the other person is pretty common. Didn’t you know more than half of what the Company does is gather clippings from newspapers and news sites from around the world?”

“And?”

The Holy Swordswoman urged her on from the windowsill, so Armelina got back on topic while lying face down.

“Sorry, sorry. I found enough of a bombshell to make me want to hold it back until the very end. Read this part here. It’s a report concerning the Sage’s base in Ground’s Nir.”

“…Wait a second. Does that say what I think it does!?”

“See what I mean? If they’re hiding here, it’s no surprise no one can find them even an island as small as Ground’s Nir, right?”

Having regained her flexibility at Filinion’s hand, Armelina winked.

“It says there’s a chance the Sage worked out the calculations behind the Labyrinth’s irregular changes and used those very calculations to construct their very own living space and lab. That piece of shit really is a step or two ahead of the rest of us.”

Part 4

The opponent this time was the Sage who was skilled enough to modify a portion of the Labyrinth into their own base. The silver lining was that Beatrice’s group was very familiar with the Labyrinth.

“Armelina, let’s see the map.”

“Sure thing. You should be thankful you know someone with a map obsession.”

“Okay, overlay the maps for the last 6 layouts. If there’s an area that stays the same every time, that would be the most likely spot.”

They immediately found such an area, but it was not some unexplored area in the greatest depths. In fact…

“The Labyrinth’s entrance!? W-well, I suppose that area can’t change since it’s the starting point and no one would ever question it.”

“And the Sage would probably get sick of having to traverse a deadly maze full of Gimmicks and Traps every time. Somewhere near the entrance would certainly be more convenient.”

Plus, the challengers working toward the depths would not loiter around the entrance. They would pass right by it with their first step. Everyone’s focus was on the darkness beyond, so they never noticed the secret right in front of their eyes. And when returning from the depths, everyone was too focused on the hope seen in the sunlight at the surface that they would not hang around near the exit.

“…They tricked us.”

This was not just a theory. Beatrice’s group was at the level cap. They had challenged the Labyrinth and passed that entrance area enough times to claim that things only truly began once you reached Level 99, but they had never noticed anything odd about it. They had walked through there enough times that their feet had to have worn a noticeable path on the stone, so they had to admit the Sage’s method was perfect.

The Sage was always right alongside them, yet no one noticed.

Beatrice felt like that got to the heart of the Sage’s character. Magic, Pieces, technological revolutions, Ground’s Nir… Just like with electricity and wireless signals, it would be hard to find a human whose life had not been influenced by the Sage to some extent, but no one knew their name or what they looked like. Plus, the Holy Swordswoman’s group had begun to realize that the Sage was a real person working out of an actual base and not just some legendary figure. That meant that he, she, or they had been standing alongside 7 billion people and snickering at them all this time. They had been secretly watching the people fall into pandemonium as they were tossed around by money and technology.

They had been elegantly observing the wars of the world.

“Beatrice, what about Boo Boo?” asked Filinion. “If the Sage was involved in the attack on his village, we should probably tell him about this. But it also might bring back up some painful memories for him. I know this won’t be an easy decision…”

“Yeah.”

Beatrice understood the White Witch’s concerns. The attack on the village, Skull Wave, and the Ice Waterfall Princess. Every incident with an apparent connection to the Sage had a deep darkness behind it. That could easily become a poison that ate into a pure soul like Boo Boo.

At the same time, she recalled Elkiad, the delinquent soldier Guild that had been involved with the village attack. When he had been faced with that painful truth, he had wailed into the heavens and Beatrice had lost herself to her intense anger.

If the Sage was involved in the village attack, then they were the same as Elkiad. No, they might be even more evil. There were hints of that already. At the very least, the Sage could not be entirely innocent.

Should she let Boo Boo see and touch that darkness?

Or should she not?

“…I just had to look at it in reverse.”

“?”

“If it was me, I would never want Boo Boo to face that kind of evil alone because he wanted to protect me. Just the thought of it makes my skin crawl. And if it would make me feel that bad, I can’t put Boo Boo in the same situation. Even if this means bringing him pain.”

Filinion and Armelina only gently narrowed their eyes.

“I’ll explain it to Boo Boo. Filinion, you prepare a ton of recovery potions in case we can’t talk things out peacefully with the Sage. Armelina, you prepare for exploring the Labyrinth. I think the Sage’s base is near the entrance, but I want to improve our odds of survival if we screw up and have to escape into the

deeper areas.”

“Sure thing.”

“And you two? We’ll need a lot of food if Boo Boo is with us, so gather as much dried meat and dried fruit as you can.”

“Ugh! That sounds like the hardest job of all!”

“You can use my name at the treasury to withdraw the gears I’ve been saving up.”

“Don’t be dumb. This is a life or death situation for us too. We’re not going to rely on someone else’s money for our own survival.”

Then the 3 of them left the inn.

They were finally preparing to approach the mystery of the Sage.

Part 5

The Labyrinth.

That vast space spread its roots deep below Ground’s Nir. The mysterious place was clearly larger than the island and had many theories and rumors whispered about it. Some said it was connected to a series of caves below the ocean, some said it transcended space-time just like the Gates and took people on trips to other coordinates or worlds, and some said it was larger than a country or continent.

But its entrance was surprisingly plain. It was located on the side of a slight hill of dark soil in the forest and it only looked like the entrance to a coal mine reinforced by some logs. It was not an impressive temple and there was no iron gate refusing entry to any without permission. There was not even a fire for illumination, so it could take some wandering in the forest to find it at night.

(Come to think of it, the Iberian Orc village was located near the Labyrinth and

they didn't like that people were going inside. It was because they were acting like gatekeepers that Elkiad barbarically slaughtered them in search of Magic and Pieces.)

But at the same time, the Iberian Orcs had not destroyed and buried the entrance. That would have been a simple task for a group with strength on Boo Boo's level.

Plus, who could say if the justification given by Elkiad's leader was the truth of the matter. He had spoken like the actual attackers had not understood the true motives behind it.

All of that would be known once they directly met the Sage. He, she, or they had to have a different point of view than Elkiad and yet had supported that barbaric act.

"Filinion, Armelina." Beatrice spoke to her companions in this endeavor. "And Boo Boo, too. How about we go in already?"

"Right."

After seeing Boo Boo nod (while he carried a food supply just in case), the Holy Swordswoman's group passed through the entrance. Boo Boo was nearly 4 meters tall, but he did not bump his head.

The inside was a short straight path made of stone that led to a large staircase down. The walls on either side had lights at even intervals. Unlike wall-mounted lamps that used fire, they were masses of heatless particles, like countless gathered firefly lights.

Beatrice could not even guess how many times she had been here, but this was probably her first time to come to a stop. Once she knew there were no Gimmicks or Traps near the entrance, she had always walked right on through.

"…But we should have noticed."

"?"

"There's no locked door at the entrance, but the clockwork Gimmicks wandering the Labyrinth never come out. Almost like they're blocked by an invisible power. So could the real secret be right at the beginning, not in the

greatest depths?”

The most likely candidates were the short straight path or the stairway down. Beatrice and the others split up to look and feel along the walls and floor. A few Parties passed them by on the way deeper inside and gave them curious looks, but this was not the time to worry about that.

“Boo. Beatrice, look here. Sniff, sniff.”

Surprisingly, the first one to notice something off was Boo Boo.

He felt along a part of the wall.

“This spot is kind of weird. I’m not sure how to describe it. It smells like a smart person? Like old paper?”

“Wait just a moment.”

They may have been Mixing ingredients and a tool for Appraising them, but the White Witch rubbed a few kinds of powder on the wall with a pencil-like tool and visualized what seemed odd about the area.

Two tall rectangles appeared alongside each other like fingerprints at a crime scene.

“…They look a lot like the panels of a double door.”

“Armelina, you can open microscopic locks with your physics calculations, right? What about this?”

“Hm… There’s no keyhole, so nope. It looks more like a product of Magic than metalwork. It’s the same as creating Pieces. You have to mix together multiple Elements like a cocktail and it will only react to the accurate ratio out of the billions or trillions of possibilities, much like a DNA sequence.”

“Also…um, Beatrice? Pay attention to the floor as well as the door on the wall. Eep.”

“?”

Hearing that, Beatrice casually looked down and then froze in place.

Some of the White Witch’s powder for revealing the hidden door had fallen to the floor. And it had reacted. Reacted to some truly cruel instant-death Traps

that should not have existed in the entranceway.

They had not activated yet, but they were all standing on them. Or rather, they could not help but stand on them. They were so thoroughly placed that they may have covered every inch of the floor as well as the walls and ceiling too.

(The entire area is covered with a crueler version of a bear trap? What was that about walking right through the entrance because there are no Gimmicks or Traps here!? I'm so stupid!!)

She hated herself for not noticing more than the person who had laid the Trap. She felt like she had been carelessly walking into the tooth-lined maw of a giant beast every time she entered the Labyrinth. And not only had she put herself in danger, but she had invited her companions in too. If that maw had ever snapped shut… She shuddered just imagining it.

Traps generally triggered when you stepped on them, when a switch or wire was thrown or pulled, or when a puzzle was solved incorrectly.

Beatrice's group had already stepped on the landmine, but the maw of death had yet to shut. People from all around the world walked through here every day, but she had never heard of someone being devoured.

In that case, there was only one possible trigger.

"Wait, shouldn't we avoid touching this door? I don't want to screw up and get chewed up by hundreds or even thousands of man-eating Traps."

"I-I guess this was never going to be easy. Do we have to find the key the Sage uses first?"

"While we could fall back, do we have any chance of solving this? I seriously doubt we can find info on the Sage's master key by asking around the inn town," said the Holy Swordswoman. "Also, we can't just ignore all these Traps. I mean, could you continue exploring the Labyrinth like before after seeing these?"

And the world was changing as they spoke. The Pieces brought back from Ground's Nir would lead to more and more technological revolutions.

Even if they uncovered a horrific truth, they could not allow themselves to be left behind. The more they were delayed, the more the chaotic breakthroughs

would twist the world in an ugly direction.

Also, if the Sage truly had been involved in the Ice Waterfall Princess and Noble Dancer incident, the passage of time would only increase the risk. If more and more assassins of that level were sent in, Beatrice's group would not at all be safe.

"Falling back seems like the best way to ensure our safety, but I don't see how falling back will improve our odds and it will only increase the risk, so waiting for more information might actually be more dangerous."

"But, Beatrice, you see how many Traps there are here, don't you!?"

"Well, yes, but…what if we removed them one at a time? Traps have fixed positions, so if we spread word of them in the inn town, gather enough people's attention, and get their help, we might be able to remove all these Traps in a short period of time."

Even as she suggested it, Beatrice knew her idea was hardly realistic. She was just trying to force her way through the problem.

And at that very moment…

Beep.

"!!!???"

"!!!???"

"!!!???"

It was only a quiet tone from the wall, but all 3 members of that frightening level cap group just about jumped out of their skin. Even if it was quieter than a smartphone's ringtone, it was more than enough of a shock to their hearts given the current situation.

But despite their expectations, the Traps had not all activated at once. In fact, Boo Boo spoke up while tilting his head.

"Look. The door on the wall is opening."

"Wait, but why!? We never found any kind of master key!"

They had no idea how to open it from outside. Which meant…

“Boo Boo, prepare for battle! The Sage might be coming out of there!!”

Beatrice forcefully drew her rapier from the sheath at her hip, but then she came to a stop. Her eyes were drawn to the giant Shining Weapon that Boo Boo held.

Yes, the digitized souls of the Iberian Orcs had been sealed inside that weapon, but where had he gotten it? The Sage had been involved in the attack on his village and Skull Wave had attempted to retrieve it. In that case, it could easily be connected to the Sage.

“Could it have…reacted to Boo Boo’s Shining Weapon?”

Boo Boo himself only tilted his head.

“What do you mean? I don’t know how to use the Magic you humans do.”

“More importantly, we’re still in trouble! If the Sage is in there, we’ll definitely run across them!!”

“It was going to happen sooner or later. Get ready, Beatrice! Boo Boo, too!!”

The cleverly hidden double doors slowly opened.

What waited within?

Part 6

“Wha-…?”

Beatrice’s eyes widened.

The space before them was wide and its ceiling was incredibly high. Rooms two or three times the size of a sports stadium or theatre were not uncommon in the ever-changing Labyrinth, but this was on the same level as the entrance, before descending the very first staircase. The horizontal size was one thing, but the vertical size should have been impossible.

(Was the theory about space-time bending inside the Labyrinth true?)

The incredibly large space was a sea of bookcases. More than just the first floor on which Beatrice's group stood, a look up showed layer after layer of elevated pathways rising toward the endlessly tall ceiling. They had not investigated them all, but they could see lots of bookcases there as well. It felt like peering into opposing mirrors.

"Is the entire place…one giant library?"

Filinion gulped and looked around before gasping and sprinkling the same powder on the well-polished marble floor.

"N-no reaction. That was hardly a thorough inspection, but there don't seem to be any Traps around here."

"Well, you might have a tosa dog in front of your house to scare off burglars, but I doubt anyone would want to keep one inside their house. They'd get eaten by it."

They were still wary of the Sage, but this place was simply too wide and tall. They even felt like the library acted as an entirely new Labyrinth. Beatrice had expected to find the Sage stooped over some work in a cramped room, so this was entirely unexpected.

"I can't believe this. I feel like I'm going to get lost in a sea of books."

"Boo. It's a good thing we brought a lot of food. But are we allowed to eat where there are books? I'm a little worried about that."

Beatrice smiled at Boo Boo's concern as she glanced over at a nearby bookcase.

"What are you doing, Beatrice?"

"I'm trying to figure out the Sage's habits… I don't know if they're an individual or a group, but they prepared this lab near the entrance to deceive us yet maintain some convenience. …This might be the same. It might be wrong to let the great size of the library get to us and head randomly into the depths."

"That's true. In your room, the things you need most often will naturally end up nearby. Like the TV remote, your smartphone's charger, or a manga volume you reread a lot…"

“I see you dodged any kind of feminine touch by not mentioning jewelry or makeup.”

“I-I’m a shrine maiden in the real world, so I can’t help it!”

“Now, now. We can tease the glasses girl about her dirty room later.”

“I don’t have a dirty room!! Grandmother makes sure to clean it for me!!”

“And the problem is how you have no issue with someone cleaning your room for you at your age.”

The Fighter Priest and White Witch’s argument seemed like it would never end, so Beatrice ignored them.

She randomly pulled a thick tome from the bookcase.

“The workings of life…”

The detailed contents could wait until later. She just wanted to know the genre for now. She pulled out book after book and flipped through them. She was looking for a bookmark, some notes, or a folded corner indicating a frequently referenced page.

She came to understand some things as she did so.

“Alchemy, the possibility of artificial life, ATCG and fire/water/wind/earth, the shape of a soul, the difference between bringing back the souls of the dead and creating new souls, necromancy and possession, the soul seen in information science, embryos and bioethics, the philosopher’s stone…?”

The Sage was not randomly gathering information in all directions like in an encyclopedia. There was a clear genre here. It was all about the souls of the living, how to artificially create them, and how to resurrect them.

Was the Sage attempting to reach the territory of god, or to carry out the work of the devil? However, Beatrice had already seen partial successes in that field.

(Skull Wave, the collection of bones from those fallen in Ground’s Nir. And…)

“Boo. I wonder if this Shining Weapon was made here.”

“…It might have been.”

All of the purged Iberian Orc’s souls had been digitized and stored there. It was

simple enough to say, but they did not actually know anything solid about the process. As proven by the many people who collapsed while exploring the Labyrinth, people had not conquered death even with Magic. No one would believe it was possible if it was not someone as legendary as the Sage.

That said, Beatrice was curious about the Sage's position in all this. They might have supplied the weapon without knowing anything and they might have taken part personally.

And just as she was wondering about that, "they" suddenly arrived.

"Searching through that will reveal nothing, Holy Swordswoman."

It was a gentle female voice. Beatrice naturally looked over and spotted a figure walking slowly out from behind the bookcases. The figure wore a large black gothic lolita dress.

She almost looked like an heiress or princess, but that conflicted with the thick silver shackle around her ankle and the metal ball resembling a pig face that was attached with a chain. Her arms drooped down in front of her and the wrists were shackled together and bound by a thick silver band. And then there was her face. Her entire face was covered by a silver bottle one size too big, but the very top had a large T-shaped handle much like a clock key or corkscrew. Was it a variation on a garrote known as a juicer? As the name suggested, that torture device applied pressure to the victim's skull as the handle was turned. There was a flat panel of fine mesh over the eyes and another over the mouth, but the face within could not be seen.

She was reminiscent of a princess imprisoned in a tower.

(Is this…?)

Influence, wealth, knowledge, connections, and beauty.

This noble prisoner had every sort of power, but that was why the common world had robbed her of her freedom.

(This is the Sage…?)

They faced a legend.

The Sage really did have a physical body and was someone who required food

and sleep.

But at the same time, it did not make sense.

Based on what Skull Wave had said and the fact that the Sage had been directly involved in the origin of Magic, they had to have been active decades earlier. Her face was not visible and her slender body was almost entirely hidden by the dress, but the skin of the visible cleavage looked far too young.

(So are they a group and not an individual? Or does a new person inherit the title every generation? Or…)

Had the Sage transcended bioethics and the concept of aging?

She physically existed there and yet her presence provided no answers. The Sage spoke from beyond the waves of the bookcase sea.

“This may look like a mountain of unknown heresy to you, but these are no more than the accumulated gravestones of failure. They were useful in the sense that carving away the failures allowed the outline of success to grow more distinct, but there is no value in the actual knowledge you will read there.”

“The outline…of success…?”

“Yes.” With her arms bound by shackles and a silver band, the woman laughed within the darkness of the juicer. “The resurrection of the dead. And I mean a complete resurrection that includes the body from before their death, Beatrice.”

“!!!???”

Beatrice forcefully told herself not to let herself be taken in, but she still found herself reacting to each and every word. She half-forced her mouth open while seemingly brushing aside an invisible spider web.

“Why...?”

“Hm?”

“Why would you want that!? Given what we know, you’re definitely one of the people who led to the erasure of Boo Boo’s village!!”

“Why do you think?”

Still calm, the Saint dragged along the hem of her gothic lolita dress and the

pig-faced metal ball attached to her ankle while her shackled arms seemed to accentuate her large breasts. She finally stepped into the end of the lobby where Beatrice's group was.

Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina all immediately raised their Shining Weapons at the ready.

Boo Boo alone was unsure what to do.

"Boo. What does any of this mean? Did you give this to me? Have I met you before???"

"Hee hee. That is the cleverest question any of you has asked me. But will those 3 give us time to deepen our friendship?"

With a gentle smile, the person who wore both a dress and chains toyed with something in her shackled hands: a small hand bell that shined with a silver light.

"I prefer to avoid direct fights using Magic. So I must apologize, but I will provide you with another opponent. Okay, Boo Boo? And you use this as a chance to cool your head somewhat, Holy Swordswoman."

She lightly rang the bell just once, as if summoning a maid or butler.

Immediately, the entire giant library shook.

"Wha-…!?"

Even when an extraordinarily powerful Gimmick, like a Punishment or Gatekeeper type, rampaged through the Labyrinth or a Break News roared outside, they never felt shaking so bad that the fear of a collapse squeezed at their hearts like this.

This oddity was visible. The living legend of the Sage could erode the world's laws and generally accepted assumptions.

But if that was all, Beatrice's mind would not have gone entirely blank. Their group included three level cap fighters and the lone surviving Iberian Orc. No reinforcements could defeat them so easily.

(We know she's hostile now. The Sage really is someone who prefers conflict to talk. Who knows when we'll get another chance if we let her escape. Who knows how many ways she'll attack us both in open and in secret! So we need to finish

this here and now. We need to keep the Sage from messing with us any further!!)

“Are you sure you want to fight, Beatrice?”

So the true despair was yet to come.

“If you had actually thought about what I’m researching here, you would have realized ‘that privilege’ does not belong only to you.”

“…?”

“Beatrice, up above!!”

Hearing Boo Boo’s shout, the Holy Swordswoman looked up and felt like she had left reality. Something had jumped down from one of the elevated pathways. It was incredibly large.

“Ah.”

“Beatrice!!”

The girl only stood there, so Boo Boo grabbed her arm and just barely pulled her away before “it” shattered the marble floor as it landed. That showed its scale once more. Its full body was much larger than a human’s.

It had a humanoid body and a pig face.

It was a full 5 meters tall. Plump fat covered steely muscle.

“Ahh…”

But this should not have been possible. That species had been wiped out save for Boo Boo. Surely the Sage had not been raising a secret survivor here all along.

And what past event had the Sage been present for?

What meaning was there in the lifeless expression and skin color of this new pig-faced giant? What meaning was there in the integrated circuits that crawled along its entire body like some kind of giant bite wound?

Yes, it was almost like…the aftermath of having all the souls sealed in the giant Shining Weapon. Almost like the soulless containers of flesh had been forcibly reused.

“Let me introduce you to my adorable partner and my greatest masterpiece. I simply refer to him as Disaster, though. Now, Beatrice, what do you think I used to make him?”

“Ahhhh

That bioethical abomination and crystallization of Alchemy began to move.

The end of his right tusk was missing and his muscles did not seem alive. It was like an empty shell that gave off the unpleasant dampness, coldness, and stench of a sweaty shirt put back on after being removed for an hour.

As the Holy Swordswoman howled in rage and started forward, she noticed a surprising weapon in Disaster's hand. It was longer than Boo Boo's at more than 5 meters and it was contained in a glistening black curved scabbard.

(A Japanese…sword?)

No, that was not it.

He forcefully drew it, to reveal…

"A…*tetto*…!?"

A *tetto* was a striking weapon with no blade that made up for it by being made extra thick. This could not be looked down on as a fake sword. The well-forged steel was more than 5 meters long and it was wielded by the strength of the supposedly destroyed Iberian Orcs, so what would happen when it was used?

"

!!"

Beatrice's mind went blank.

The next thing she knew, she, Filinion, Armelina, and Boo Boo had been forced out of the giant library and into the straight passageway near the Labyrinth entrance.

And…

"Boo Boo, your hand!"

"Yeah, I'm just glad none of you are hurt. I'm fine."

Boo Boo's powerful right arm was dripping blood. Beatrice and the others had failed to react to the extraordinarily large blunt weapon. Boo Boo alone had moved fast enough and he had been injured covering for them.

As for his injury…

“Let me see that! Wait…huh? I don’t believe it…”

“Dammit, he’s leaving through the door!! We need to get out of here!!”

Filinion froze up with recovery potion in hand, so Armelina grabbed her arm. Beatrice and Boo Boo also began a sudden burst of movement. Then the extraordinarily large body entered the passageway like a storm. The weapon in his right hand became a flash of light, cut the air faster than the roaring wind, and sliced through the opposite wall (which the Sage had covered in countless traps) like a hot knife through butter.

Yes, it sliced through. Boo Boo’s wound was a cut.

(The lack of a blade doesn’t matter. It’s just like a helicopter rotor. When that much weight is swung at such great speed, even a blunt weapon can cut like a blade! And how the hell can it slice through the Labyrinth’s walls!? It takes Boo Boo’s level of strength to break those walls!!)

Disaster’s strength was likely even greater than Boo Boo’s. While Boo Boo used his blunt weapon to hit, Disaster used his to cut.

And Disaster had no fear of death.

But they did not have time to carefully observe their enemy’s power. Beatrice’s group had rolled aside to avoid Disaster’s charge, but they had unfortunately fled toward the stairs leading down. That meant they were headed toward the Labyrinth and not the exit.

The straight path to the exit was blocked by Disaster’s giant body. They doubted they could get past that *tetto* swung with greater force than a helicopter rotor.

“This is no time to stick around. Boo Boo, everyone! We need to head into the Labyrinth for now!!”

“E-eek! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!”

Filinion was already half in tears as Boo Boo grabbed her around the waist with one hand and ran down the stairs with the others. Disaster of course did not just watch them go. He threw aside the unnecessary scabbard, held the naked *tetto*, and pursued the fleeing backs of Beatrice’s group.

If he could fully reproduce the muscular strength of an Iberian Orc, he would fill the gap in no time.

So as soon as she reached the stairs, the Holy Swordswoman twisted around to look behind her.

(All those Traps are probably linked to an error report from the hidden door. In that case!)

“Metal Jet!!”

She swung her rapier and 8 lines of heat appeared from nowhere to scorch the air. She targeted the door on the wall instead of Disaster. It must have decided the person trying to burn through was in the passageway because the sea of Traps all activated at once.

*Snap, snap, snap,

“Beatrice, this way! Hurry!!”

When Boo Boo urged her down the stairs, she came back to her senses and ran down. This battle really was somehow different. That was just how much the Sage’s evil recolored the world.

Yes, just like when she first widely revealed Magic to an entirely unprepared human race.

“Ksshh! Kssshhh!!”

After arriving in the stone floor for beginners at the bottom of the stairs, Beatrice heard a racket coming from all the walls around them.

“Do not struggle, Beatrice. There are a lot of unrelated people in the Labyrinth. And my adorable Disaster has some trouble with precision targeting. Don’t blame me if something unexpected happens.”

Was the voice being carried by Magic, or was the Labyrinth’s structure being remade in real time?

“(Either answer is bad. Beatrice, this is her lair!)”

“(I’m aware of that!)”

There was nothing they could do with the straight passageway to the exit blocked, but things changed in the next floor down. The Labyrinth was generally constructed from rooms of varying sizes connected by corridors.

Meaning…

“(Armelina, prepare the map. Filinion, you give Boo Boo a recovery potion. Let’s watch what route Disaster takes, make a wide circle around him, and return to the stairs. Then we can get out without him blocking the way.)”

They heard more and more rumbling noises. The Gimmicks wandering the Labyrinth were made to move when they did, so they were given as much time to think as they wanted so long as they stayed entirely still. But Disaster was probably running right through and sweeping aside all of the gathering Gimmicks.

“How naïve.”

A voice from the walls and ceiling cut off their thoughts.

A moment later, the wall right next to Beatrice burst apart.

“Wha-!?”

Disaster was not fighting the many small Gimmicks. He was fighting the Labyrinth itself. He did more than break through the walls. A mysterious attack resembling a beam blade sliced diagonally though the entire floor from one end to the other and the monster approached along the shortest course. In fact, even the floor had collapsed, exposing the next floor down.

“P-planning is worthless now!”

“Take this!!”

Filinion squeezed her eyes shut and threw a test tube from each hand. The cold pig-faced man thoughtlessly attacked them with his *tetto*, slicing more than breaking them, and a colorful liquid splattered out and fell right on his head.

“Those were failed eye drops! They interrupt the signals in the optical nerves. We need to use this chance to get away from-…”

She trailed off at the killer intent she sensed.

The thick *tetto* was mercilessly targeting Filinion. A curving flash sliced through even sound as it accurately flew toward her neck.

“Eh?”

She felt more confusion than fear.

Boo Boo immediately cut in with his Shining Weapon. Their weapons clashed, sparked, and stirred up the wind.

“Impossible… Taking out his eyes…doesn’t accomplish anything…?”

“Pull yourself together, Filinion! Boo. Beatrice, take her away!!”

Beatrice and the other humans could not even stand on the same field.

Had the Sage sought this power? Was that why she had helped Elkiad attack the village and why she had left all the Iberian Orc souls with Boo Boo?

Had she only been throwing out the parts she did not need.

Had it all been to acquire the strongest vessel of flesh to complete a powerful fighting force that would do her bidding?

Had it all been for nothing more than that!?

“Saaaa

As soon as Beatrice converted the possibility to words in her mind, the scenery changed around her.

Part 8

Skull Wave, a Skeleton in a cowboy hat bearing a large red stone, suddenly looked up into the sky and spoke with annoyance in his voice.

“So it’s begun. But I can’t take either side.”

“What is it, mister?”

A small light fluttered nearby. It was Alice, the Fairy in a violet dress whose short twintails resembled a candy wrapper. But the Skeleton did not have time to answer. After grinding many bones and charcoal into a powder and stuffing them into a wooden tube, he ignited it with flint.

With a loud explosion, Alice was nearly flipped upside down where she flew.

“Wh-what was that for…?”

Alice grew tearful, but Skull Wave did not respond. He stared up into the sky where milky white smoke spread out like a butterfly and he spoke in a hopelessly bitter voice.

“Figure it out, Boo Boo. …Honestly, I’ve always had such a bad habit of siding with the underdog. Not that there’s any saving them whichever side I choose.”

Part 9

There was no change to the girl’s body or mind. She did not feel a sense of floating or acceleration. And that was why Beatrice was overwhelmed by

confusion when the scene before her eyes suddenly changed.

It was true no one would have noticed if something like this was secretly set up in the Labyrinth's corridors. Especially within the Labyrinth where each floor was made up of corridors and rooms with identical interior designs. You would think you had walked down a long passageway, but you might have actually been sent to a completely different passageway on the other side of the world.

But this time, Beatrice had not been sent to another location on the same floor or even in the Labyrinth at all.

"What…!?"

She was high in the sky. Ground's Nir had some water source mountains to the northeast and there was a series of floating islands positioned even higher than their peaks. The largest islands were the size of a truck trailer and the smallest ones were only clumps of rock one could hold in their arms, but they were all clustered together like an asteroid belt.

Beatrice's group had been sent to the small island at the very top. It was unclear how water had gathered there, but fresh water flowed from a spring, fell from the floating island, branched out as it hit the various other islands and clumps of rock below, and continued flowing vertically down toward the ground like an *amidakuji* or tournament diagram. It ultimately fell to the peaks of the water source mountains and formed the rivers that wet the land.

"The Original Water Source? But why here?"

"I don't think we have time to think about it. W-wahh!!"

They felt wind pressure. Beatrice instinctually understood that something was parting the air as it approached them.

Armelina threw her Shining Weapon metal staff into the water source and it quickly transformed into a steel boat.

"Get in! I you don't want to die, get moving before asking questions!!"

After Armelina jumped in, Beatrice and Boo Boo followed with Boo Boo holding flustered Filinion's waist in a hand.

As soon as the corpse flesh parted the air and appeared, his 5 meter *tetto*

flashed horizontally. If they had been 3 seconds slower, the girls' necks and Boo Boo's torso would have been sliced through as if by a helicopter rotor.

"Armelina, what is this!?"

"My Shining Weapon can transform into just about any blunt weapon and I remembered that one of those was a toy used during the witch hunt. There was a cruel form of torture where the victim was laid face-up inside a metal boat, tied down with chains or ropes, and slowly lowered into the water. But more importantly, shut your mouth or you'll bite your tongue from the impact!!"

"Eh? Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

Filinion's scream was caused by a floating sensation pushing up at their stomachs.

In other words…

"We're falling…!?"

After Beatrice's short cry, a heavy impact ran through the small metal boat. The waterfall split like an *amidakuji* or tournament diagram as it fell from small island to small island. Each individual drop was only a few meters, but the impact upon landing was incalculable.

"Boo Boo, can you reach the bottom of the river with your Shining Weapon? If so, please steer us! I don't know how long we'll last if we just go with the flow. We might take a branch with no floating island below and end up falling more than 1000 meters onto a mountain peak!!"

Boo Boo immediately stuck his log or steel beam of a club into the water and moved to the back of the boat. They did not have time to wait around. They would only continue horizontally for at most 10 seconds. The closest mountain peak was 1000 meters below them. It was more like jumping down small cliffs than rowing downstream.

(The world's fastest waterslide reaches nearly 200 kph on a slope of about 80 degrees, right?)

And more importantly, the world shook once more.

Disaster had not hesitated to jump down from the higher level and his weight

had shaken the small floating island.

He said nothing. It was unclear if he even had a mind of his own. They only knew he pursued them into the river and mechanically raised his long *tetto*. The rapid current would have drowned Beatrice's group, but it was only waist deep on 5-meter Disaster. He continued after them and attacked.

They were already within his range. If he swung his thick *tetto* down on the boat they were all crammed inside, at least one of them would be bisected along with the boat and the rest of them would fall into the water. They could never survive that.

Beatrice briefly looked back at that person who looked so much like Boo Boo. She recalled the anger of learning about the attack on the village.

But she raised her rapier.

She held out the tip and gave a roar.

"Napalm Fire!!"

Several balls of light shot out. They were combustible objects the size of soccer balls. They would persistently pursue the enemy at low speed and scatter sticky fire like a flamethrower or naphtha upon contact. They normally played the role of the hound: disturbing and confusing the enemy long enough to finish them off with some other Magic. But its power could be raised at close range by firing several of them together like a shotgun blast.

She had no idea how useful this would be.

The metal boat was already tilting as it began to fall from the next waterfall. Beatrice and Disaster's attacks shot past their targets without even coming close to hitting.

"Oh."

But even so, the Holy Swordswoman had made an attack of her own free will. She was no longer indirectly attacking by triggering the Traps.

She had used her own hands to attack someone who might have been Boo Boo's friend or family.

"Ooooooooaaa

aaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

As she yelled, the metal boat carrying them fell.

Part 10

“Aliiiice!!”

“Yeeees!?”

Those voices rang through the forest.

The palm-sized Fairy sisters named Meridiana and Alice flew after each other near to the ground. While the scene looked heartwarming, Fairies were at the bottom of the food chain, so taking any noticeable actions apart from the group put their lives at risk.

“You were skipping out on paying back Boo Boo again, weren’t you!? Listen, Alice, we need to polish the windows and keep the floors and walls squeaky clean while he’s out.”

“No, I wasn’t just out playing! I’m on an important mission to take you back from Boo Boo the Sister Thief.”

“Alice! Besides, I heard from that bone man that Boo Boo saved you from a Ground Spider!”

“Gh… C-curse that old man. Why’d he have to say that?”

“We Fairies must be faithful to our world of debts and repayment. Now, let’s go. The more sturdy his house, the harder it is to repair. Daily maintenance is crucial if it’s going to last for long.”

“Uuuh!! I don’t wanna!! I understand all that, but I can’t stand letting him have you!!”

“Alice…” Meridiana’s temple twitched for once. “A stubborn girl gets the Tree Hollow Honey!!”

“Uboh!?”

With a dull splat, the older sister stuck a spatula into the pot hanging from her hip and flung something at her little sister’s face. It looked like a translucent yellow ball, but it burst into a sticky goo when it hit her face. Either due to the sped or the viscosity, it provided a surprisingly hard hit for being a liquid.

The more she struggled to get it off, the more the honey tangled around her face and body, so the violet-dressed Fairy’s 4 thin wings grew heavy and she lost her freedom. Her flight grew unstable, so Alice made an emergency landing on a large nearby leaf.

“Ah, agh… That wasn’t very nice…”

Meridiana landed lightly on the same leaf and snorted.

“Alice. Haven’t I always told you what happens to kids who don’t listen? They get covered in so much Tree Hollow Honey that they can’t move. Disobeying the Fairy rules is a frightening thing. Are you prepared to have that happen to you?”

“Ughh…”

Seeing her sister stick the spatula back into the pot at her hip, Alice fell silent.

…Briefly.

“There’s something wrong with you… I bet you’re planning to cover me in honey so Boo Boo can lick it off of me like I’m candy! Asleep or awake, all you ever do is try to get on Boo Boo’s good side!!”

“Eh?”

Merdiana’s face grew dramatically red.

“C-c’mon, Alice, you’re being way too imaginative lately! I mean, we Fairies specialize in Craft skills, so it is important to be able to draw out accurate diagrams from our minds, but the idea of covering yourself in honey and letting Boo Boo lick it off of you with his big tongue? I see, I see. That’s not bad. Um, not bad at all. O-of course I only mean that it would make Boo Boo happy and that’s what takes top priority. Eh heh heh heh heh…”

“…”

Alice slowly peeled her sticky body from the leaf and waved her tiny hand in front of her sister's face as Meridiana held her cheeks and shook back and forth. After finding no response, Alice reached for the spatula sticking out of the pot hanging from Meridiana's hip.

She gathered strength in her gut and shouted with all her might.

"Bad girls get the Tree Hollow Honey!!"

"Ubweh!?"

A nice splat came from Meridiana's face.

Even if it was a liquid, the speed made it a powerful blow.

Part 11

The primarily vertical chase continued. Boo Boo's group's boat moved from waterfall to waterfall to repeatedly fall straight down, but Disaster stepped into the river and walked along the bottom instead of swimming. That gave him a handicap he had to force his way through, but Boo Boo's group still could not lose him. He was always about 7 or 8 meters behind them. That was close enough that it felt like he would be able to reach out, grab the entire metal boat, and shake it around.

"Beatrice, take care of the driftwood to the side and the stone sticking out!"

"I'm on it, Armelina!!"

The Holy Swordswoman swung her flame rapier from the metal boat and detonated the nearby obstacles. But this was not to secure a route; they were acquiring supplies. Armelina grabbed a few pencil-sized fragments as they flew through the air.

"Okay, now adlib the rest!!"

With that, flames and projectiles sliced through the air. Armelina's Shining

Weapon had become the boat, but that did not mean she was helpless. She could use the muscular strength supported by her Percentage-type equipment and the impact attacks she specialized in were not limited to holding things and swinging them around. There were a lot that involved throwing things as well: boomerangs, bolas, tomahawks, *etc.*

(The frightening part is that his thick skin can deflect Beatrice's flames. And unlike Boo Boo, he has no pain or fear. That means our only option is to slice his skin open with a blade and then heat him from within!!)

The spiral of flames and stone blades worked together.

But Disaster maintained the momentum of his pursuit. He let the hard-to-dodge sticky flames hit him, deflected them with his hard skin, and used his *tetto* to accurately strike down only the sharp projectiles. Countless sparks flew.

"He's not just predicting the timing of our attacks. Even at this speed, he can determine what kind of attack it will be and respond accordingly!? That's-…"

Her shocked exclamation was cut off.

With a light sound, a dark red flower blossomed at the center of Armelina's chest. It was one of the stone blades she had thrown herself. Disaster had not been randomly deflecting them. He had adjusted the angle and speed of his attack to accurately hit them back.

"Gh…bh…?"

"Armelina!? Oh, honestly!!"

Seeing the Fighter Priest cough up blood and collapse, noncombatant Filinion stopped curling up with her hands on her head and quickly pulled out a small bottle of recovery potion.

And Disaster's fierce attack did not end there.

"!!"

Boo Boo suddenly pulled up the giant Shining Weapon he had been using to steer them. Immediately, Disaster swept his *tetto* horizontally from a distance. It should not have reached. It should have been a meaningless attack. But then a heavy metallic noise burst from Boo Boo's hands. The girl with silver and red hair

widened her eyes.

(He deflected something? But what?)

“Boo!! Beatrice, duck!!”

Each time Disaster swung his *tetto*, Boo Boo was nearly knocked backwards as he held his Shining Weapon defensively. A white spray burst at the same time. Finally, the Holy Swordswoman caught on.

Disaster’s body was soaked after running through the waist-deep water. And that meant the *tetto* was as well. Water was dripping from the sides of the weapon.

“This invisible blade…is water? He only has to swing his *tetto* as hard as he can to send out a horizontal line of water that slices through his surroundings like an industrial cutter!? Is this also how he sliced through the entire Labyrinth floor!?”

With no one to steer it, the boat fell down a waterfall.

Disaster had forcibly used his striking weapon to cut, and now this. His strength had reached a level that overturned some basic assumptions. He could probably slice through armor by melting rather than breaking, just like a tank gun that focused on a single point.

“Cough, cough! Ugh, what the hell was that…?”

“Oh, good. You woke up, Armelina. Wait…
gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

Just as the glasses girl began emulating a white coated angel with a lily lap pillow, she uttered a shrill scream.

“Ahead…up ahead! The boat…this…this!?”

Her thoughts were too scattered to understand, but with Boo Boo handling defense instead of steering, the metal boat was at the mercy of the current. If they chose the wrong course on the *amidakuji*, they could end up falling several hundred meters straight down.

Beatrice quickly turned toward where they were headed instead of at Disaster behind them.

“Ah.”

“There are no more floating islands, so what are we supposed to do!?”

As the tearful White Witch shouted, the bottom of the metal boat collided with a white mountain peak. Disaster had been unable to catch up because the waterfalls had given them near freefall speeds. The mountain river would have a rapid current, but a safe downstream current would not be fast enough. The metal boat would become their coffin.

But then something unexpected happened.

The boat bounced once in the summit waterfall basin and its excess momentum sent it flying right out of the water. They began sliding down the white slope. They picked up speed in no time. With four aboard (including extra-large Boo Boo) and the weight of the metal boat itself, their heavyweight sled was slicing through the wind in the blink of an eye. They had nearly twice the speed of the trip down the waterfalls.

“Gyah, gyah, gyah, gyah!? Th-the wind!! Is this what it’s like on top of a bullet train!?”

“Boo. With things like this…”

Boo Boo stood back up in the metal boat and regained his balance at the back end. He then stabbed his log or steel beam of a Shining Weapon into the snow passing by so quickly. By shifting his weight like on a snowboard and by pushing with the weapon, the sled’s random path gained a definite will.

And Disaster did not wait around.

“What…is that?”

Armelina held the center of her chest which still felt odd, looked back behind them, and grew speechless.

He was coming. He was coming after them. Disaster had compactly folded his legs below himself as he pursued them like he was skiing down the slope.

But that should not have been possible with just his feet. He would need something to act as skis. They would have to be at least 3 times the length of his feet.

Only one possibility came to mind.

“Did he freeze his own soaked feet? Is that how far you can go when you aren’t alive!?”

Beatrice shouted at the unreasonableness of it all, but there was more. Disaster weaved back and forth in a flattened S-shape. He had not lost control. Similar to what Boo Boo had done, he stuck his giant *tetto* into the deep snow as he slid along.

And what did that cause?

The snowy slope itself was sliced through, lost its support, and slid down all at once.

“E-eek!? Eeeeeeeeeeek!! What is thaaaat!?”

With an avalanche more than 100 meters across behind him, Disaster pulled his *tetto* from the snow and directly pursued them once more. He seemed to be bringing a limit wall with him. He might not care since he was not alive, but the rest of them would be wiped out if they were caught in that ferocity.

“Not good. He’s got more speed!”

“Is he built to F1 specs!? How many cylinders does that monster have in his engine!?”

“!!”

Beatrice immediately threw flames from her rapier. She did not think she could knock out Disaster, but if she melted the line of snow between them, she could reduce his speed.

Disaster immediately made a quick turn and then slid down the steep slope along a path parallel to the metal boat’s. Beatrice continued her interference by firing more flames to blow away the snow along his path.

But Disaster made a slow horizontal swing of his *tetto*. The water droplets created when the Holy Swordswoman explosively melted the snow were caught on the end of the bladeless sword.

“Not good…”

He reversed the sword and an ultra-high speed water blade sliced through the world. Boo Boo once more stopped steering and just barely managed to block it with his log-like Shining Weapon. He bent back from the blow and the metal boat wobbled unsteadily.

“Beatrice, you can’t melt the snow! Oh, honestly! If I could use one of my blunt weapons, I could break apart blocks of the thick snow without melting it!!”

“With those speeds, I bet he could turn snow or sand into a blade too!”

“M-more importantly, where should we go!? This slope won’t continue forever!!”

They had only lucked across the snowy slope, but they would be helpless once the snow and slope ended. Things were bad enough while on the run, so they could imagine how bad things would be if Disaster actually caught up.

The overwhelming difference in weight meant Boo Boo had to steer the metal boat and he gave an answer while keeping his Shining Weapon warily raised.

“Somewhere without living things.”

“Well, I doubt there are many living things in the perpetual snow up here…”

“No, not that. …If what she said is true, there should be a red swampy place in this mountain!!”

“?”

They did not have time to sit around and think. Boo Boo’s group and Disaster entered a forest of towering conifer trees. Their speed race gained a slalom element in which they made small evasions while keeping any speed loss to a minimum.

“Gyahh! Gyaaahhh! Ugyaaa

the trees. He kept moving left and right to avoid the thick trunks while searching for the optimal attack position.

“Not good. The thick foliage means our altitude is dropping. Isn’t the snow going to end soon!?”

“More importantly, if these trees have fruit, he can get the moisture he needs with a *tetto* slash. Watch out for that blade!!”

Beatrice motivated her partners, but they were close to cornered. Unlike before, Boo Boo needed to constantly steer for their slaloming avoidance of the trees. With his Shining Weapon sticking shallowly into the snow, he could not use it for defense. Filinion and Armelina could not join the fight for a variety of reasons, so Beatrice had to defend against the water blade on her own.

Could she do that?

Could she really defend everyone without Boo Boo’s support? She gulped as Disaster finally made his move. He swung his giant *tetto* and crudely swept away the tree branches.

The leaves contained moisture, but it was so little it could not wet the tip of your tongue, much less your throat.

Nevertheless, if that moisture reached his sword…

(Here it comes!!!!!!)

The Holy Swordswoman clenched her teeth and held her rapier horizontally in a Magic pose never seen in actual sword fighting.

Boo Boo spoke in a low voice with his back to her.

“Boo. We’ve finally arrived, Sutriona.”

That name was unexpected, but then they all noticed the conifer forest clear away. No, they had left an environment that could support plant life. What awaited them here? The dark redness gave off a strange odor and bubbled stickily like a witch’s cauldron even when the surrounding snow suggested it should be frozen. The oddity was the size of a small lake and Beatrice exclaimed its identity.

“A toxic…bog!?”

As they ran parallel to each other, both Boo Boo's group and Disaster entered that dark red hell simultaneously.

Part 12

"Ahh…"

With her skinny body wrapped in large tropical leaves like a leaf swimsuit, Sutriona continued to enjoy the sauna at Boo Boo's house. She had hopped back up onto the bench that looked like a wall at its size. She had been left with the key since Boo Boo was not in the habit of locking up. It could be unclear who truly owned the house, but since Boo Boo only wore a loincloth with zero pockets, it was obvious he would only drop it in the mountains somewhere if it was left with him.

"Yeah, this is great. Nothing quite like a sauna after a job well done. I just hope Boo Boo notices the Womb Pot when he sees those milky-white fireworks. Also, I was pretty muscular in life and my wife hated it when I got all sweaty, so I'd avoided doing this for such a long time."

"Don't just show up and start talking about your wife, Mr. Bones. You really haven't changed at all. You still don't listen to anything anyone tells you. And what good is a sauna for a Skeleton?"

"Oh, shut up. You're the one that made a toxic bog out of the date spot where I first seduced my wife. What are we supposed to do about that? The Thousand Dragon's mother is still sleeping in the deepest part, you know?"

"Mh. Well, sorry about that. I don't know who this wife of yours is, though," said the flushed Fairy Queen sitting on the bench. "I might have been pissed back then, but I really shouldn't have placed a toxic lid on that spring of life. I need to be more careful."

Part 13

Boo Boo's group in their metal boat and Disaster on his ice skis charged out onto the dark red toxic bog. They ignored the avalanche approaching from behind. As soon as it reached the toxic bog, the white wall was devoured until it disappeared.

Not even the powerful body of an Iberian Orc would survive in a sea of Sutriona's special-made toxins. The girls would be killed instantly. Not even their Percentage-type support would help much.

But at the same time, the metal boat and ice skis would not sink that easily. Not at this speed anyway. Boo Boo's group and Disaster remained parallel to each other as they hopped along the water's surface like two stones thrown by kids seeing who could skip theirs over the water the most times. If they kept their momentum going, they would reach the opposite coast of this hell.

But they would not let that happen.

Boo Boo gave a yell.

"Beatrice!"

"…Right!!"

The Holy Swordswoman swung her rapier once more. Instead of a reckless defense, she made a definite attack. Disaster also prepared to attack using the *tetto* with the tree moisture on it.

Fire and water.

The two surged out above the dark red bog.

Aiming was easy since they could not take much evasive action while essentially skipping across the water. And while Disaster was alone, Beatrice had her companions with her.

So even if both their attacks were on target, they would not both be taken out.

As Beatrice went all out, Boo Boo caught the water blade on his giant Shining

Weapon to protect her. Meanwhile, the flame attack scored a solid hit on Disaster.

His thick skin may have been able to deflect it, but the extent of the damage did not matter now. If the impact pushed him at all, he would lose his balance while skipping across the water.

There was a dark red explosion.

That was the result of Disaster's giant body forgetting to run across the water and slamming into the sticky hell. He had been hit by Filinion's failed potion in the Labyrinth and that seemed to have had some effect. And this was the toxin produced by one of the Break News. He would never escape unscathed.

"…"

"Grab on, Beatrice! Filinion and Armelina, too!!"

The metal boat finally arrived on the other side of the toxic bog. Boo Boo stabbed his thick Shining Weapon deep into the snow to slam on the brakes.

"Wah, wah. There's a bubbling sound coming from the bottom of the boat!? Hop off now!"

Everyone did as Filinion insisted. Sutriona's toxin was made to burn away people's rational minds, but its behavior seemed to change at this concentration.

After finally returning her Shining Weapon from boat to metal staff, Armelina asked the Holy Swordswoman to disinfect it with her flames.

"But if that stuff is enough to melt a metal boat, we should be able to relax-…"

She trailed off.

They watched as something burst from the thick, dark red bog.

It was an incredibly burly arm that was still wholly intent on attacking even after being partially eaten away.

That thick skin had deflected Beatrice's flames and those powerful muscles had turned water droplets into a deadly weapon at the swing of a *tetto*, but in that short time, holes had been eaten in them as they melted away, revealing

white bone in places.

That true disaster continued his march.

The *tetto* he held was barely recognizable as his head and torso emerged from the dark red water even as they melted away. He rose onto land. Disaster unsteadily returned while giving off a chemical smoke not caused by simple heat.

“Eek? Hgyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!? B-Boo Boo, Beatrice, hurry! Hurry up and do something!!”

Filinion fell onto her butt in the snow and screamed. Armelina raised her Shining Weapon, realized the metal staff was still coated in a dangerous substance, and clicked her tongue.

But Beatrice was different.

She looked to the horrific remains of someone who may have laughed and cried alongside Boo Boo at one time and she weakly lowered the tip of her rapier.

“Boo Boo…”

“Right. I’m fine, Beatrice.”

Living Boo Boo faced dead Disaster.

“Let’s end this.”

“…”

It may have been a meaningless question. That lump of protein could only obediently carry out the commands he received, so even if he could understand people’s words, he may have lacked the mind needed to comprehend the feelings behind them.

“Your souls are all here. So you don’t need to feel lonely. I promise I’ll return you all to normal. I trust that we can all smile again in that village again.”

“…”

But Disaster did stop moving for just a moment. His body slowly moved to the side and he lowered the *tetto* to the ground. Boo Boo did the same. As Beatrice and the others watched, their weapons slowly drew a large circle.

After a full circuit, they took a step inside the circle.

Then Disaster slowly raised his half-melted *tetto* vertically as if to bring it to his broken tusk. It was too meaningless an act to call it a fighting stance. Perhaps the optimal routines moving the corpse had gone haywire due to Sutriona's toxin. But for some reason, Beatrice did not see it that way. She did not want to reach that conclusion.

Was this a tradition of that lost village?

Boo Boo also raised his weapon vertically and he slightly touched it to the side of his impressive tusk.

"I bet this right tusk."

"…"

There was no response, but there had to be a meaning there.

He had accepted Boo Boo as a formidable opponent, as a bearer of pride and dignity.

In the tradition of their duel, Boo Boo declared what would influence the outcome.

"So you stop right here! Stop and rest in peace!!"

The snow exploded at their extra-large feet. Boo Boo and Disaster raced forward to clash at the midpoint. The battle had already begun. Disaster breathed smoke, swung his half-melted *tetto* at frightening speed, and wielded the melted steel like an infinitely extending blade. He sliced through the trunks of the surrounding trees as easily as paper, but he could not hit Boo Boo. As Boo Boo ran, his Shining Weapon knocked down attack after attack.

Once they reached each other, the time of reckoning had arrived.

This battle took place inside the circle they had drawn.

They would not attempt to stretch this out into an extended battle.

The duel came down to an instant.

Disaster's *tetto* had already been eaten away by the toxin, so its usual sturdiness had fragilely crumbled. Boo Boo's Shining Weapon roared in. Disaster

chose to mechanically defend against the overhead attack, but his *tetto* broke when it caught it.

Boo Boo's attack's momentum remained.

It continued on toward his foe's half-melted head.

The last of the Iberian Orcs did not shut his eyes in the final moment. He watched it all and felt it in his wrists.

It produced a dull sound.

Disaster stood stock still until he slowly collapsed backwards.

Nothing moved.

Nothing at all.

"D-did that do it…?" hesitantly asked Filinion.

But Boo Boo did not answer.

He looked silently down at Disaster who lay entirely motionless where he had collapsed. There was no doubting the outcome. That mass of flesh would never move again, either as a member of the living or of the dead.

"Boo Boo…"

Beatrice started to speak but trailed off. She finally realized what part of Disaster he was looking at: the loincloth.

It looked like Disaster simply had a rough rag wrapped around his waist like Boo Boo, but there was something odd at one end: a small applique made to look like a pig head.

Had traces of something remained inside that mass of flesh? Or had something new grown there? No one could answer that now because anything there had been lost.

But they could take a guess.

Disaster had not simply been obeying external commands. He may have had a warm fragment of something that let him make a decision that ignored logic and efficiency.

The Shining Weapon dropped from Boo Boo's hand with a dull thud.

He knew the answer now.

He understood what he had taken with his own hands.

Boo Boo looked up into the heavens and wept like a child. He had killed one of his own. These were the wails of one who bore that sin for those dear to him. It broke the heart of all who heard it.

Part 14

She was boiling now.

Beatrice's head had completely boiled over.

All consequences vanished from her mind. The difference in strength did not matter. Only one thing filled the Holy Swordswoman's heart: getting even with the mastermind who had trampled on the Iberian Orcs' deaths, robbed them of all dignity, and made her good friend cry like that.

She returned to the Labyrinth alone.

The Sage may have sent Beatrice's group out of the Labyrinth with the Teleportation Trap Wall in order to buy enough time to clear out her base. Letting this chance get away would leave them with no way of finding her again. And then she would laugh at them from hiding once more. There would be no stopping her then.

Without even considering the possibility that the many Traps might trigger again, Beatrice blew down the hidden door and the wall around it using fire Magic. When she stepped inside she found the woman still looking like an imprisoned princess. The owner of the giant library still wore the gothic lolita dress with her arms and a leg shackled and her head in a juicer.

"Oh, did Disaster lose? He was useful, but now I'm going to be lonely."

“Don’t screw with me!!!!!!”

“Stop it. Directly fighting with Magic isn’t my specialty.”

The Sage spoke calmly as the level cap warrior raged at her.

“And that’s why I always end up choosing trickier methods.”

A fierce attack immediately began.

The silver shackles and metal band around her arms fell away with a refreshing sound.

Just as the black gothic lolita dress’s sleeves and skirt fluttered up, several knives could be seen in the Sage’s hands. They were not just for stabbing. At the very moment the falling shackles hit the floor, flames burst from the bottom of the thrown knives, mechanical flaps wriggled along the small guards, and they pursued Beatrice from multiple angles like flying serpents.

“Pencil rockets!?”

These were miniature rockets built as a proof of concept before building a life-size one. Even at pencil-size, they could be launched with the power of gunpowder and they could be made into lethal weapons by attaching a blade to the front.

Elkiad had used firearms powered by gunpowder, but the technological level on display here was much greater. Beatrice could not even imagine what they used for the homing and guidance calculations.

But the Holy Swordswoman had reached the level cap and claimed things only truly began once you reached Level 99. This was not enough to daunt her and she used her rapier to accurately strike down the 7 poisonous fangs. And then she roared.

“Internal!!”

Fire wings burst from her back and she shot across the giant library. She moved right up to the Sage all at once to wipe off the smile in her eyes which could only produce hatred.

Meanwhile, the woman in the gothic lolita dress and silver head juicer was not at all tense.

She calmly swung a hand and multiple long, clockwork objects burst from within the dress.

They were not staffs or spears.

The long metal handles were attached to large metal rings that used a structure somewhat like handcuffs to capture someone's torso or neck using springs. Small spikes covered the inside of the rings, so they were based on the infamous man catchers used to walk prisoners around in dark medieval prisons.

More and more of the rings closed around and bound various parts of Beatrice's body: neck, torso, right arm, and left thigh. But it would not end there. The Sage had no real reason to keep her prisoner alive.

Beatrice sensed danger like static electricity on the nape of her neck.

It came from the thumb-sized spikes covering the inside of the metal rings.

All of them worked to destroy the captured flesh using the power of gunpowder.

This devilish weapon safely captured the target and then attacked them from point-blank range once they could not escape. Plus, the Elkiad battle had already proven that Beatrice could be injured by bullets.

"Oh?"

But…

Even so…

"I told you not to screw with me."

With intense heat surrounding her, the Holy Swordswoman remained unscathed. The gunpowder had detonated, but the metal spike bullets had not fired. The great heat had melted the surface of the metal and fused them with the man catchers themselves.

No, it went beyond that.

The man catchers restraining Beatrice were melted and blown away. With her freedom secured, Beatrice used her empty left hand to forcefully grab the Sage's collar.

Even as the fabric grew scorched, the Sage's expression remained unchanged. It was as if she would not bat an eye even if the world came to an end.

"Are you angry?"

"You seem to be pretty dumb for someone known as the Sage. …Do I look anything but angry?"

"And yet you did not accept the advice of those benevolent bones who remained attached to the world of the living even after his flesh and blood were stripped away. Didn't he tell you revealing my face would only bring you misfortune?"

Beatrice's anger shifted up another gear.

The girl turned up the firepower of the hand holding the Sage's collar. The intense heat burned away the Sage's gothic lolita dress. It was like burning her alive. In fact, it was enough to blow away the silver fetter and the juicer on her head. The Holy Swordswoman gave no thought to what would happen to the human inside.

Yes.

Unless the Sage had 100% Fire Resistance, she should have been screaming and writhing in pain. However…

"Wha-…?"

"I warned. Thrice even. But you made this decision regardless, so the blame lies squarely on your own shoulders."

She was unharmed.

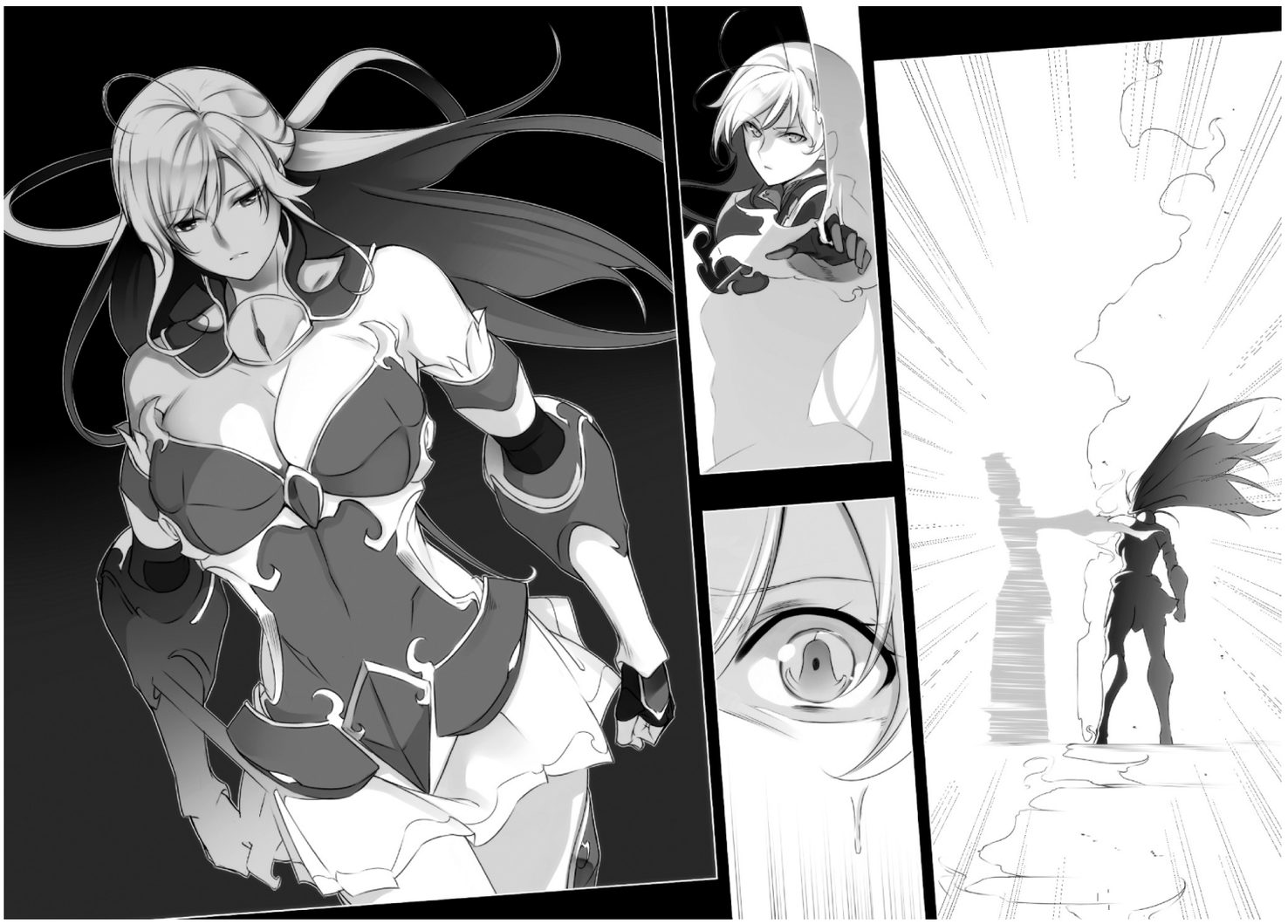
She was so perfectly unscathed that she seemed to glow brightly.

With the dress and head juicer reduced to no more than embers, long silver and red hair, blue eyes, and white skin were revealed. She wore a miniskirt and light armor that looked like a suit of armor cut down to size. The only odd aspect of the red glowing woman was the Shining Weapon at her right hip. It was likely based on a one-handed sword, but the pieces of many broken, shattered, and destroyed Shining Weapons had been gathered up and forcibly pieced together into that shape. It was entirely inorganic, yet the creepiness and disgust of

seeing it hit Beatrice even harder than it had with the monster made by reusing the Iberian Orc corpses.

A certain rule existed: humans could not remain in Ground's Nir for long. And they required a Shining Weapon to Sign Out through a Gate.

So if she had gathered together that many broken weapons…



"Whose do you think these were? No, who do you think could not return?"

"…"

It was like seeing a collection of human corpses stuffed as trophies. Her eyes glowed brightly as she uttered crazed words.

"I said before that directly fighting with Magic isn't my specialty, didn't I?"

She was a little taller, the bewitching light in her eyes was greater, and her body had sexily filled out from her younger days as a girl.

"That is because I might carelessly obliterate my opponent. But if you insist we go there, I will not hold back."

Altogether, the Sage who stood before Holy Swordswoman Beatrice was…

“…Me…?”

Long-Lived Royal Elf Sibyl's Live News☆

Attack Report: I Built a Grave in the Forest

Today I’ve come to the toxic bog that Sutriona made. I have confirmed the destruction of tentative codename Disaster. He was only a makeshift doll and we had already concluded that he could not lead to the resurrection of the Iberian Orcs…but it’s still kind of sad.

It’s unfortunate that we lost him before we could reach a final answer as to what resided within him, but that aside, the defeat of Gatekeeper Disaster means the path to the Labyrinth base has been opened. She is coming. I’ll leave it to you how to deal with that, but if you’re going to do it, be thorough. Don’t let yourself be influenced by unnecessary emotion.

I will take care of Disaster’s remains. After sterilizing it…oh, I know. How about I bury him where the village used to be?

Okay, I think I’ll end my live news report here.

…It originally belonged to one of the humans who lost their lives challenging the Labyrinth, but this Shining Weapon you collected and repaired is quite interesting. Since I am a proud Royal Elf, I can’t use human Magic no matter what we do, but these news reports have been a lot of fun.

Epilogue

Boo Boo ran all around the mountains.

Beatrice had gone on alone. He had noticed fairly quickly, but it had already been far too late. He ran and ran, but saw no sign of her.

After checking everywhere he could think of, he finally reached the entrance of the Labyrinth.

The Iberian Orcs and all the other Nonhumans in Ground's Nir avoided even approaching that place. Even he never would have had anything to do with that deep, dark hole if Beatrice and the others had not asked him.

"Gulp."

But he took a step inside once more.

To see if someone important to him was safe, he broke that taboo and entered the Labyrinth on his own.

But just before he could…

"Boo…Boo…?"

"Beatrice!!!???"

"…Ha ha. I look pretty pathetic, don't I?"

The Holy Swordswoman was a mess when she left the depths. She always seemed like his big sister and he saw her as a powerful person who calmly watched over him from a step or two ahead. And yet now she looked so very weak. Her armor was broken, she had cuts and bruises all over, and one of her eyes would not open as it oozed blood onto her cheek. She limped as she walked and she gingerly held her ribs with her dominant hand.

She must have relaxed upon finally seeing a familiar face.

Beatrice collapsed forward, so Boo Boo found a way to support her without

destroying her in his too-large hands.

“Sorry. I’m sorry, Boo Boo…”

“…What happened?”

“I couldn’t become a proper partner for you. No, I was never qualified in the first place…”

“What happened, Beatrice!?”

He shouted, but she did not answer.

The strongest Holy Swordswoman passed out in that precious person’s arms.

The battle with the Sage had more or less been a disaster. Beatrice had only attempted to endure instead of actually standing up to her. And even that had been risky.

Beatrice’s Holy Swordswoman was a rare Job that allowed her to handle offense, defense, recovery, and support all on her own. Using her limited Experience Points on every one of those directions would have made her a jack-of-all-trades who did not stand out in any one way, so she had narrowed her focus down to fire and learned all of that Magic. That should have been the shortcut to the greatest success.

And yet…

“Heh.”

After removing all her bonds, the Sage smiled thinly and drew her sword – the one pieced together from the remains of many destroyed Shining Weapons – with her left hand. The world then blossomed madly with uncountable changes. Some used water, some used wind, some used earth…and some used the fire that Beatrice specialized in. The Sage overwhelmed all else as her storm Magic combined into a single giant mass.

When she drew a large circle with the tip of her sword, she had already hit Beatrice with more than 100 explosions that sent her flying backwards.

“Did I attack the Iberian Orc village with Elkiad? Yes, I did. Did I give my Shining

Weapon to young Boo Boo? Yes, I did. Did I collect the unneeded containers of flesh and use them for my own purposes? Yes, I did! But you know nothing! You don't even know the definition of an Iberian Orc!!"

"!!!"

The Sage had the same face and knew unfamiliar Magic, but Beatrice stood her ground. The soles of her boots scraped at the floor, she raised her rapier, and she attempted to escape the explosive blasts pushing her helplessly away.

"The Iberian Orcs were not originally pig-faced giants."

She fired countless flames, but not even one of them hit the Sage. In fact, Beatrice used those flames to shake the air with the extreme temperature difference and produce vacuum blades or to rub soot and smoke particles together to produce lightning. And yet it barely had any effect.

(Is it not just Fire Resistance? Has she also mastered wind and water!?)

"Orcs were originally a species with no defined form. They repeatedly crossbred with all sorts of animals and plants and their descendants retained the strengths of those other species. The pig-faced giants with extraordinary muscular strength and a superb digestive system are merely the form they reached as a result of that. It seems there were eras during which they delved into the sky or sea before reaching this point. If they had continued to reproduce with Elves or Mermaids, they would likely have become handsome and beautiful. If they had repeatedly bred with humans, they would likely have become intellectuals with a full understanding of Magic."

Beatrice wanted to silence that talking mouth.

She wanted to end this monologue and make the Sage lick the floor instead.

She clenched her teeth and sent back fierce attacks, but the Shining Weapon in the Sage's left hand sent back the lights of many Elements with two or three times the intensity.

"They are the peak of all living things. But that is why they felt cornered."

She could not beat her. No matter what she did.

"The Iberian Orcs' bodies changed drastically along with their frequent

optimizations, but their blood grew rusty and their blood vessels broke down like some kind of disaster. Their elder came to me directly with a request. They essentially held a bomb no matter where they evolved from there, so he wanted me to bring an end to all of them except for Boo Boo, the only one who showed no sign of the disorder! Iberian Orcs can reproduce with any animal or plant, so the village could be repopulated even with Boo Boo as the sole survivor. But if the sickly village remained, Boo Boo would undoubtedly choose his sickly brethren over anyone else. So the elder asked me to kill them all so that would not happen!!"

Finally.

Her situation had not improved, but Beatrice finally felt like she had something to latch onto.

"That's why you worked up the soldiers of Elkiad and attacked the village?"

"Yes."

"And that's why you let only small Boo Boo escape on the day of the attack?"

"Yes!!"

"If you were really satisfied with that, why did you digitize the souls of the Iberian Orcs you killed? Why did you give them to Boo Boo!? Why collect their bodies afterwards!? And it's not as directly related, but why create the Sage's Stone on Skull Wave's head!? You weren't satisfied with anything you'd done, so you've just been trying every method you could think of, haven't you!? So can you really stand before Boo Boo and feel proud in what you've done, Sage!!!???"

"…"

"If that's enough to silence you, then I already have my answer. If you can't answer me, I'll do it for you. Your life was a failure. That's why all those Iberian Orcs gave up on healing themselves and had you kill them!! No matter what reasons you might have had, how can you possibly claim what you did was right!?"

For a brief moment, Beatrice's flames held back the Sage's ever-changing Magic. No, they even pushed it back.

“Explain everything you’ve done and go apologize to Boo Boo for it all, Sage!! No matter what grand excuses you make, that’s something from which you can’t escape!!”

“I wanted…” The Sage clenched he teeth. “I wanted to save them too.”

“But you gave up. No matter what you might have thought, you did it. And that’s why the bodies piled up in reality!”

“But…”

Did she really have more to say? Did she still have more excuses for why she had been in the right? The Holy Swordswoman found the act more disgusting than what the actual excuses might be, but the Sage’s next words were entirely unexpected.

“What would you have done if their elder had convinced you that Ground’s Nir would be destroyed if you didn’t?”

“What…?”

“Why do you think the Iberian Orcs continually took in the strengths of so many different animals and plants despite the risks involved? And we’re not just talking about an individual. Their village was an organized gathering of that great strength. But it wasn’t just for the fun of it. They had a mission. A raison d’être.”

Beatrice’s mind nearly went blank, but one piece of information floated to the surface for some reason.

…The Iberian Orcs did not like that the humans visited the Labyrinth.

“They were gatekeepers.”

The Sage spoke the cruel truth of the world.

“They existed to stop that which sleeps in the Labyrinth’s greatest depths when it rises to the surface. The elder and the others were facing the death of their kind, so their only choice was to leave everything with Boo Boo and have him rebuild the village! And he had to do so before that monster crawls up from the depths!!”

And…

“That should do it.”

“Yes, I suppose it’s more or less complete.”

Voices spoke deep in the giant library constructed by secretly redesigning a portion of the Labyrinth.

The Sage wore red armor. A blonde-haired, green-eyed Royal Elf wore a green dress that revealed her slender and pale body from the chest to below the navel. They were dealing with some medical equipment and an examination table far more sturdy and large than one meant for humans. Instead of electronics, they were all metal devices that might be on display in a museum, so some might have thought they looked more like torture devices.

But there was more than that there.

For example, the food that had gone cold after no one touched it. Among the food were the skewers of Master Rabbit and Sliced Fish soaked in yogurt that a certain someone continued to eat despite the nutritional value or lack thereof. There was also something like a giant picture book drawn in the hieroglyphic writing only seen in ancient wall art. There was a rough but sturdy cloth used to polish animal tusks and a special Mixed deodorant that could eliminate even the strongest bestial odors in an instant.

The two of them continued disposing of it all.

But after reaching her breaking point, the Sage threw a bottle of deodorant against the wall.

Sibyl, the Royal Elf with a circlet adorning her beautiful face, covered her long ears at the loud noise and spoke like an exasperated parent as a floral scent wafted out.

“C’mon, don’t throw things.”

“Sorry.”

“Now, then. Disaster was an undead-type, so we need to sterilize our entire bodies now that we’re done.”

“…Please don’t ask me to take a bath with you at this age.”

“Don’t act like you haven’t found it useful working with a long-lived Royal Elf who barely ages. Besides, you can’t even make your own breakfast without a maid. And yet you always pour all your effort into things like practicing how to make Iberian Orc delicacies.”

“I’ve more than repaid you.”

“That’s almost the worst part. I really am grateful you fixed up this thing you picked up.”

The slender Elf’s long ears twitched as she toyed with a strange weapon that resembled both a bow and a staff. A thick tree branch was bent in a crescent moon shape, green ivy was wrapped around that and drawn into a string, and a large eyeball-like crystal was embedded at the top end. It had likely belonged to someone who had lost their life in Ground’s Nir. In other words, it was a Shining Weapon. The Sage had repaired it, released the ID authorization lock, and given it to the Royal Elf.

The transparent bathtub they soaked in was filled with an assortment of disinfecting agents like high-concentration medical alcohol and chlorine. It was not an electric bath, but they felt a tingling pain in their skin as they soaked up to their shoulders. They were wearing bath towels, but since this was for disinfection purposes, they occasionally dunked their heads below the painful bathwater without worrying about their hair.

“Sigh…”

“C’mon, if you’re going to get in, then try to relax and submerge your body.”

“You are just full of complaints today.”

“Kh. Don’t move your legs in the tub. Where do you think you’re poking me? Besides, this fairly nasty disinfectant liquid is splashing out of the tub.”

“Who cares? We’re leaving here today anyway.”

A short silence fell. While soaking in the glass bathtub that had measurement markings like a beaker, they gave themselves over to the fizzy feeling of the disinfectant attacking every part of their soft skin.

Finally, the slender and pale Royal Elf opened her mouth again. And she spoke

solemnly.

“…So that’s really what’s going to happen, huh?”

“This place was really only used to approach the outline of success through repeated failure. We were only reusing it since it was there, so it isn’t that painful a loss.”

“But you stayed here longer than anywhere else. Perhaps even longer than you were on Earth.”

“…”

“And you’re still going to throw it out?”

“Yes.”

With a splashing sound, the Sage rested the back of her head on the edge of the clear bathtub. Her chest rose and fell as she took a deep breath and she looked up at the tall, tall ceiling.

“I completed my obligation to the elder and the rest of the Iberian Orcs. I brought them death and left Boo Boo at the starting point of a new village. Hee hee. And it seems he is well on his way to surrounding himself with girls. …So from here on out, I am going to do what I want. If Boo Boo has already created a new village, it shouldn’t be a problem if I get carried away and bring back the old Iberian Orcs. Especially if they are perfectly healthy this time.”

“…That violates the principles of bioethics. Although it may not be my place to say that as a Royal Elf who has a nearly infinite lifespan with no risk whatsoever.”

The digitized souls, Skull Wave, and Disaster. It was true the Sage’s experiments had a Necromancy-like sense of desecration and she could not guarantee success. In fact, she seemed to be searching for the answer by gathering data on failures.

“I had to throw out any kind of ethics when I granted their wish. And I did so by staining my own hands with blood. So now it is time for them to grant my selfishness. That’s the way I see it.”

“That’s the thing about you. No matter where you start from, you always end up being pretty bad.”

“Ha ha. That’s what *he* said too.”

The Sage snapped her fingers and the entire library burst into flames. The two of them were soaking in highly flammable medical alcohol, but they did not even tense.

“Farewell, my failures.”

“If we’re leaving here, where should we set up shop next?”

“How about somewhere warm, quiet, and with good food?”

“I don’t think a heavenly paradise is an option.”

They looked at the floating embers like they were watching fireflies over a clear stream. Of course, if just one of them fell into the bathtub…no, if one even touched the unseen volatilized substance, they would be set on fire.

“When will the ruin arrive next?”

“I thought you Elves were good at statistics since you have so much free time, prophecy-loving Sibyl. No one gathers more data than you.”

“…Do you think we’ll make it in time, given the Labyrinth’s operation speed?”

“We must ensure that we do,” said the Sage. “Ground’s Nir. The monster in the ground’s depths. We have continued to hone ourselves so that we can let Boo Boo and the others live with happy smiles on their faces even if this island is a clockwork armory that produces giant calamities out of countless gears.”

Beatrice was badly injured, but that was why she could not immediately Sign Out and head back to Earth. Those injuries would remain. If those deep wounds were to open without her Percentage-type support, she would die before she could receive the benefits of modern medicine. She needed Magic healing before returning.

“Over here! Over here!”

Filinion was unsure where to go, but after some advice from Sutriona who was blending in with the humans, she chose to heal Beatrice at Boo Boo’s house instead of the inn town. The level cap warriors who were representatives of the

strongest tended to create grudges, so it would be best not to let anyone see her so weak.

The White Witch took the lead while Boo Boo and Armelina could only follow her instructions by boiling water and wiping away sweat.

And feeling so helpless may have been why Armelina spoke up.

“But didn’t Beatrice’s story not entirely make sense?”

“You mean the possibility of the Gates transcending time as well as space? Before even getting into the concept of time paradoxes, I don’t really know how the Gates work, so I can’t really say.”

“No, not that. …This third party looks just like her and claimed to be Beatrice. But this is Ground’s Nir. Isn’t there a simpler explanation for this than anything as crazy as time travel? Besides, wouldn’t it cause a paradox if you met your past self?”

“Boo. What do you mean? This sounds confusing, but I want to know everything I can about Beatrice.”

“It might not be as obvious to you since you were born here, but the combination of Percentage-type Magic we wear gives us different appearances between the real world and Ground’s Nir.”

“Wait a second. Is that why the Sage wouldn’t have been afraid to meet her past self?”

“If she knew about Beatrice in the first place, she could adjust her own appearance to match.” Armelina chose her words carefully. “Of course, that’s easier said than done. Just choosing the same equipment as Beatrice wouldn’t be enough. Your appearance in Ground’s Nir is a combination of your original appearance and the equipment you wear. But the Sage had mastered all kinds of Magic. She might have tried billions or even trillions of combinations to make herself look so much like Beatrice that it shocked Beatrice.”

They had no proof for this either. It was just another theory. But even if it was true, the motive was still a mystery. They had no way of explaining why the Sage would have adjusted her appearance to match Beatrice’s at some point in the past.

Boo Boo and the others looked down to where Beatrice slept. Boo Boo spoke quietly to the frail girl who remained unconscious and only frowned while stirring uncomfortably.

“…What happened, Beatrice?”

Afterword

That concludes Volume 3.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

The overall theme this time was necromancy. This is a difficult and risky genre to work with because messing with and resurrecting souls reduces the value of a life and can remove all the tension from a battle series. You should be able to see what I mean if you noticed Volume 2 would be ruined by reading Volume 3 first.

Souls have been mentioned here and there since Volume 1, so I dug deeper into that subject here.

I think my biggest success here was tearing down the assumption that the enemy could never wield the power of an Iberian Orc because Boo Boo was the sole survivor.

…If I was going to write an RPG-style fantasy, I felt I had to touch on the distortions created by the unique rescue methods of easily bringing people back from the dead with recovery potions or paying money at an institution. Then again, there are some hardcore games where once someone dies, they're dead for good.

Unlike Boo Boo who goes for physical blows, I aimed for a stranger sort of romance with Disaster by having him cut things with a weapon that normally shouldn't be able to cut. It's from that genre of cutting open a beer bottle with a karate chop or splitting a stone with a newspaper. To differentiate him from Boo Boo, I had him slice like a helicopter rotor using a blunt weapon or fell trees with a water jet blade.

Armelina also played a larger role this volume. She has the extremely delicious position of a powerful and straightforward priest woman, but she's also a somewhat unfortunate sub-heroine who can be overshadowed by even more

powerful and straightforward Boo Boo. I wrote her as someone who refused to let him outdo her because there have to be things she can do that he can't. I put a lot of that in this volume.

Armelina's most unique aspect out of the three girls is the fact that she can go on a rampage in the real world just as well as in Ground's Nir. I pictured that final raid scene in Chapter 2 just like the attack on the corrupt governor's mansion in a jidaigeki. You might wonder why she wouldn't have a sword if it was a jidaigeki, but since she's a cop, I thought she would be the type to use a *jutte* instead.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. With the necromancy stuff like Skull Wave and Disaster, I wanted them to make an impact while also showing some restraint on the grotesqueness (Um, maybe you could call it a casual version of the undead?), so I doubt this was an easy one. Thank you for sticking with me yet again.

And I give my thanks to the readers. What did you think of this Armelina!? How about that Armelina!!? She's like a big sister we can all rely on in our time of need. I hope you could all accept her.

And I will end this here.

I think my favorite was the Ice Waterfall Princess relaxing in a liquid nitrogen bath.

-Kamachi Kazuma

最強をこじらせたレベルカンスト剣聖女
ベアトリーチェの弱点③

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The Weakness of Beatrice the Level Cap Holy Swordswoman That Made Being the Strongest Even More Trouble – His Name? Boo Boo - Volume 03

Author: **Kamachi Kazuma**

Illustrator: **Mahaya**

Translated by **Js06**